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## **Immigration and Belonging: Chinese Immigration to Argentina ??? ????????????????**

Emily Pearson-Beck

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Immigration and Belonging: Chinese Immigration to Argentina  
论阿根廷中国移民的归属感及身份认同

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Chinese and Latin American Studies from  
The College of William and Mary

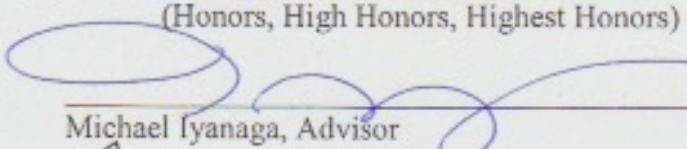
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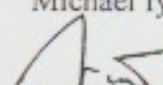
Emily Pearson-Beck

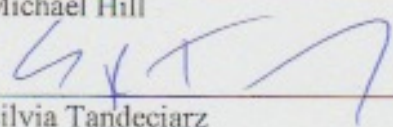
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# Contents

Acknowledgements	iii
List of Figures	iv
Abstract	v
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: A Map of Chinese Argentina	19
Chapter 2: Language & Identity	64
Chapter 3: Whose Feminist Journey?	86
Conclusion	115
References	118

# Acknowledgements

When I first got back from doing ethnographic field work in Argentina, I did not know how to start talking about what I had just experienced. People would ask me what I had done, and my winding, tangential, too-long explanations did not do justice to the people I spoke with. Thanks to the help of many incredible people who helped me think, write, edit and research, I got to what I have now. I want to thank my advisor Dr. Michael Iyanaga for his hard work and incredible support during the last year and a half, and my mentor Dr. Luciana Denardi for welcoming me to Argentina and introducing me to most of the people I interviewed. Thank you to everyone who helped me throughout the research and writing process, especially Diou at the William & Mary Confucius Institute, Dr. Michael Hill, Dr. Silvia Tandeciarz, Dr. Monika Gosin, Dr. Bickham Mendez, my close friends and my family. Most importantly, I want to thank and recognize the people who informed this research, and who openly shared their personal stories so that I could learn.



# List of Figures

1.1	Charla: Ethnic minorities of Yunnan and Qinghai Poster	22
1.2	Entrance to ACCA	23
1.3	ACCA Sign	23
1.4	ACCA Interior	23
1.5	Mónica's Drawing	25
1.6	Wellbeing Classes Flier	27
1.7	Speak Chinese Easily Poster	27
1.8	Wellbeing Classes Poster	27
1.9	Taiwanese-Argentine Center	31
1.10	Chinese Christian Church	32
1.11	Arch and Train Tracks	33
1.12	Building next to Barrio Chino Arch	33
1.13	Front View of Barrio Chino Arch	34
1.14	Barrio Chino Arch Close-Up	34
1.15	Barrio Chino Lion Statue	35
1.16	Chinese-Run Bazaar in Barrio Chino	36
1.17	Barrio Chino Main Street	37
1.18	External View of Chinese Bazaar in Barrio Chino	38
1.19	Map of Barrio Chino, at the crossing of Arribeños and Juramento	39
1.20	Bazaar Interior: Aisle	41
1.21	Bazaar Interior: Utensils for Sale	41
1.22	Bazaar Interior: Pens for Sale	41
1.23	Regalería in Barrio Chino	43
1.24	Clothing for Sale in Barrio Chino	43
1.25	Lai-lai Exterior	44
1.26	Chinese Tea, Argentine Peso, and Receipt for "Tofu Familiar"	45
1.27	"Springtime Tofu" Exterior	46
1.28	Chinese Grocery Store Aisle	48
1.29	Chinese Grocery Store Exterior	55
1.30	Chinese Grocery Store Entrance	55
1.31	Lucky Bamboo	62
2.1	Luò yè guī gēn	68

# Abstract

This research set out to answer the question: How do Chinese immigrants to Argentina form a sense of belonging? This research was initially carried out through bibliographic research and then through two weeks of ethnographic field research in Buenos Aires, Argentina which included participant observation as well as formal and informal semi-structured interviews. A broad understanding of Chinese immigrants' life experiences was garnered through hearing their personal stories. Chinese immigrants' experiences overlapped in one main way: all are considered foreign by some of the non-Chinese people around them. However, even accounting for this similarity, the most notable finding was that while Chinese-to-Argentina immigrants' stories might have had overlapping parts, no two people's stories were the same and a comprehensive study of immigrant identity formation requires a deep look into each person's unique experience.

# Introduction

## 前言

What can we learn from people's widely varied stories to discover common truths about what makes us all human? This thesis is about stories. The stories are not my own, and I will preface with the disclaimer that what I wrote cannot capture the entire story of any person I wrote about. In fact, I am barely scratching the surface on the topic of Chinese migration to Argentina. I am just beginning to discover the stories of people who I knew nothing about two years ago. That being said, there is still much to learn even from two short weeks of ethnographic field work in Buenos Aires.

How do Chinese immigrants in Argentina experience belonging? This question drove my research. Throughout the thesis, I ask related but more specific questions as I explore the various components of Chinese immigration to Argentina. Why is the Fujianese community perceived to be insular? How do people use language to express their sense of belonging and "home"? How can we learn about the process of self-discovery through a feminist lens? This thesis provides broad answers to those questions and attempts to broach the topic of belonging by focusing on three different ideas: how Chinese immigrants exist and are perceived in Argentina, the language that a Chinese immigrant used when describing her identity, and how feminism and sexual liberation plays a role in an immigrant woman's identity formation.

### **Literature Review and Research Process**

My experience studying Spanish and Chinese was indispensable to carrying out this research. I was able to read research materials in Spanish because I grew up speaking both English and

Spanish with my mom. After three years of studying Mandarin in high school, I received a summer scholarship to study in Xiamen, China. My study of Mandarin continued in college and has been fueled by multiple opportunities to live in various parts of China. I went to Buenos Aires for the first time just after a semester of studying abroad in Beijing my sophomore year of college. Living in the two countries one after another sparked many questions about the interaction between China and Argentina, and the experiences of Chinese people in Argentina. It provided inspiration for this research.

I began research for this project in Spring 2018, with an extensive review of relevant literature. The literature review consisted of two different categories of research: Transnational migration research in English and articles about Chinese movement to Argentina predominantly written in Spanish and Mandarin. Transnational migration theory provided the framework to approach this phenomenon: economic, political, and sociocultural. This was important to learn, because it taught me that transnational experiences exist outside of the Chinese community in Argentina. Reading about Chinese immigration to Argentina provided important background information before I went to Argentina to conduct field work. The semester I spent in Beijing, China, as well as my prior study of Mandarin provided me with the language knowledge needed to carry out literature reviews in Chinese, and this past year I also enrolled in a 1-credit Independent Study each semester at the William & Mary Confucius Institute. With the linguistic help provided by the Institute before and after my field work, I was able to read articles written in Mandarin about Chinese migration to Argentina. These articles were previously left out of Spanish and English literature on Chinese immigration to Argentina, and I hope to add something new to the field by incorporating them into my first chapter. My previous language and culture studies also informed my field work and allowed me to converse with people in both Spanish and Chinese for the duration of my time in Buenos Aires.

## Chinese Migration Literature

Studies describe Chinese immigration to Argentina as existing in multiple migratory waves. In fact, Chinese immigration to Argentina, according to Oviedo (2018), can be divided into three phases: the first phase began before diplomatic relations between Argentina and China started in the time leading up to 1949; the second began at the outset of the establishment of diplomatic relations around 1945-1949 and lasted until the recognition of the PRC in 1972; and the third phase began in 1972, with the recognition of the PRC and continues today. This last wave can be divided into two migratory streams, one originating in Taiwan in the 1980s and the other originating in the PRC, from the 1990s to the 2000s (Oviedo 2018, 4). While the focus of my research will be on the present, it is important to understand there is a long history of migration to Argentina. I worked with people who have different involvement with these waves, some from earlier and some later.

The first migratory wave to Argentina began during the Sino-Japanese war in 1894 and lasted until the end of the Chinese Civil war in 1949. Many Chinese men with little money emigrated alone to coastal areas of China or to Latin America. This first migratory wave led to a significant number of Chinese migrants living in Argentina. According to Argentina's National Institute for Statistics and Censuses, INDEC,<sup>i</sup> in 1914 there were 463 people of Chinese origin in Argentina, 60% of whom lived in the city of Buenos Aires (Bogado Bordázar 2002, 18). Although this number might seem small, it shows that Chinese migrants were going to Argentina and that a migratory wave was occurring.

The establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Argentina in 1945 marked the beginning of the second migratory wave. Some scholars say that this wave began in 1949 with the Chinese Civil war, but all agree that it lasted until the recognition of the PRC in 1972. During this time, one hundred families came from China accompanied by a priest. However, because of the problems he had with the Peronist government, the migrants did not stay in Argentina for long.

Instead many went to neighboring countries, mainly Brazil (Bogado Bordázar 2002, 17). According to INDEC, which likely underestimated the number of migrants present, in 1947 there were 365 people of Chinese origin in Argentina. According to unofficial data the number rose to as many as 1,500 at this time (Denardi, 2015, 82). This large discrepancy reflects the frequent inaccuracy of government census numbers, especially of migrants who fear being targeted by immigration officers in the country they reside.

When the third migratory wave began in 1972, the number of Chinese immigrants, particularly those from Shanghai and Guangzhou, gradually rose. This was likely to unify families that were previously divided (Oviedo 2018, 11). This trend was particularly marked in the 1980s. The number of Chinese migrants drastically increased from 1989 on, after the Tiananmen Square Massacre, mainly of people from Fujian province in the southeast of China. Argentina gave thousands of visas to Chinese immigrants at this time (Oviedo 2018, 11). Taiwanese migration also rapidly increased in the 1980s. This wave was likely due to increased fear in Taiwan of a Chinese invasion and may have been influenced by the US recognition of the PRC in 1978 and former US President Nixon's travel to China. The president of a large nation like the United States going to China sends a message of political camaraderie between the two nations. This message understandably led to increased fear of a Chinese invasion in Taiwan. In 1972, Argentina had stopped their diplomatic relations with the PRC and in 1973 it allowed for the creation of the Commercial Office of Taiwan in Argentina, which previously would not have been possible. In the 1980s, over 40,000 Taiwanese people lived in Argentina. Following several economic crises, especially the 2001 economic crisis in Argentina, many Taiwanese migrants left Argentina to create new lives in the United States, Canada, and Europe. Some even returned to Taiwan. In 2016, there were an estimated 10,000 Taiwanese people in Argentina, mostly living in Buenos Aires (Oviedo

2018, 12). Although these are the waves of migration typically described in existing literature, some people throughout my research described waves of migration in four or more separate waves.

Chinese and Taiwanese immigrants in Argentina are often seen as “other” in Argentine society. These immigrants are not only discriminated against on the basis of their race, but they also face linguistic barriers as they are often not able to communicate easily in Spanish. Within this transnational context, Chinese immigrants are often forced to both rethink their identities and form new ones. Understanding such identities is even more complex when taking into account the friction between Taiwanese and Chinese national identities prior to migration. Luciana Denardi highlights this distinction as one between the identities “Chinese in the broad sense” and “Chinese in the narrow sense” (Denardi 2015, 88). According to Denardi, Taiwanese migrants change their outward identity as Chinese or Taiwanese depending on the different situations they are in (Ibid). Chinese in the narrow sense refers to those who identify as Chinese only when they are from the People’s Republic of China. Chinese in the broad sense refers to those who identify as Chinese if they feel as though their customs and background are reflective of Chinese culture, regardless of whether they come from the PRC or Taiwan (Denardi 2015, 89).

Such a distinction forces us to confront some important issues: what does “culture” mean to Chinese and Taiwanese migrants? Is it a shared language? Shared holidays? The fact that they are both not Argentine? That they are “others” in a foreign land? The answers to these questions are indicative of a diasporic identity creation amongst Chinese and Taiwanese migrants in Argentina.

When identifying conflicts between Chinese and Taiwanese migrants it is helpful to look at the different migratory waves. According to Denardi, Taiwanese migrants began coming to Argentina in the 1980s, before the opening policies in China occurred. Because of that, there was still a lot of political tension between China and Taiwan. Moreover, a greater rift between Taiwanese and Chinese living in Argentina came about as migrants from Taiwan were almost always literate and

economically better-off than Chinese migrants. Taiwanese migrants often saw themselves as superior to mainland Chinese migrants whom they viewed as impoverished, uncultured, and impure from undergoing the Cultural Revolution and using a simplified writing system (Denardi 2015, 89). Moreover, Denardi points out that multiple large festivals for Chinese holidays occur at the same time in different locations, because oftentimes one festival is not inclusive to all people with a Chinese cultural background (Denardi 2016, 143).

Additionally, for two decades there were more Taiwanese migrants than mainland Chinese migrants living in Argentina, and they thus considered themselves the only Chinese of the country (Denardi 2015, 90). When migrants from mainland China began arriving in Argentina, Taiwanese migrants would sometimes act in ways to exclude mainland Chinese migrants from their organizations. For example: some organizations would not accept members unless they presented a Chinese passport, and church services were held in a Taiwanese dialect “Min Nan Hua” rather than in Mandarin Chinese, a dialect that mainland Chinese immigrants could also understand (Denardi 2015, 90).

This exclusion shows the different kinds of transnational citizenship that were previously mentioned in the discussion of the political lens of transnationalism. The effect of multiple political and national identities coexisting is that migrants belong to multiple identities and communities. Taiwanese migrants, especially the more elderly, tend to view the Chinese as untrustworthy creating a sort of moral separation between Chinese and Taiwanese migrants in Argentina. According to interviewees of Denardi’s study, some Taiwanese migrants thought that mainland Chinese migrants were “people of a lesser/lower in rank/degraded humanity, who aren’t that culture, nor that supportive, nor as responsible as Taiwanese migrants” (Denardi 2015, 90). However, not all Taiwanese migrants think this way and many actually believe the opposite. Indeed, the migrant experience is complex and multidimensional. According to one Taiwanese migrant Denardi



interviewed who worked together with a mainland Chinese migrant, “working with her opened my mind a lot, that is, they are all Chinese. Why do you have to divide ‘Taiwanese’ and ‘Chinese’? When [the conversation] touches on sovereignty, yes defend yourself, but if it is a culture, it is the same” (Denardi 2015, 93). From this we can understand the reasoning behind Taiwanese and Chinese migrants feeling connected to one another.

To best understand the present situation of Chinese businesses in Argentina and the breakdown of the countries-of-origin represented in business ownership, Denardi looked into the ownership of various businesses: “of the 20 organizations interviewed in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires and La Plata, 10 are Chinese owned, 4 are Taiwanese owned, 3 are Chinese-Taiwanese co-owned, 2 are Chinese-Argentine co-owned and 1 is Taiwanese-Argentine co-owned (Denardi 2016, 36). Additionally, many of the most important Taiwanese associations are located in the Barrio Chino, or Chinatown. However, Taiwanese schools and churches also exist various neighborhoods in Buenos Aires like Almagro, Villa Crespo, Villa del Parque and Palermo (Ibid., 37). According to interview responses, more than 20% of the organizations were created as commercial enterprises. The next greatest number of organizations were created with the intention of carrying out cultural and traditional festivities (Ibid., 37).

### Transnational Migration

In my research, I set out to understand how immigrants form a sense of belonging in a place that is different than where they were born or raised. Specifically, I wanted to learn how Chinese migrants form a sense of belonging after moving to Argentina. How do people find a community and remain connected to their own culture after they move to a place where their community only exists in small numbers and the place they have moved to has a different culture of its own? There are countless definitions of the terms culture and community that can help us answer that question,

but for the purposes of this research, I will borrow a definition of “transnational community” which also touches on the concept of culture from existing literature on transnational migration.

Transnational communities are migrant populations living in a country other than their country of origin but with ties to the country of origin... Migrants bring with them their own identity, as shaped amongst others by culture, religion, ethnicity, political regimes. This identity is nevertheless reshaped during the migrants’ process of adaptation in the country of residence and the influence and stimulation they received from the societies in which they live. New identities, single or multiple, are therefore formed<sup>ii</sup>.

Transnational communities comprise migrants who bring their own identities and cultures to new countries of residence, and in the process of adapting to that new country new identities are created. Transnational migration is the framework of this research, and in order to understand it the term “transnationalism” must first be defined. With improved ease of communication, travel and relocation, the study of transnationalism has grown as a field of study in many ways especially during the 1980s and 1990s. The definition of transnationalism has changed over time, initially described by Basch et al. (1994, 6) as “the process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement.” More recent work expands on that definition by adding in that transnational movement occurs within “fluid social spaces that are constantly reworked through migrants’ simultaneous embeddedness in more than one society” (Levitt 2007, 131). This multilayered embeddedness is visible throughout the thesis, where Chinese migrants live and form relationships with Argentines but remain embedded in the Chinese community because of their shared language with other Chinese migrants.

Scholars typically divide the study of transnationalism into at least three analytic fields: economic, political, and sociocultural. Some scholars argue that given that the world is held together by a global capitalist system, it is this system that often acts as the impetus for migratory flows and impacts cultural practices and identities within the world (Schiller 1992, 8). At the same time, however, transnationalism as a concept largely depends on understanding nation-states. According to Schiller, “The international flow of capital and distribution of labor takes place in a world that

continues to be very much politically divided into nation-states that are unequal in their power, and which serve differentially as base areas of international capital” (1992, 8). These nation-states result in political membership, political borders, and national citizenship, all of which impact transnational migrants (Ibid.) While both the economic and political perspectives tend to focus on macro structures, the socio-cultural realm turns toward individuals, as it identifies changes in social life, family structure, and constructions of class, gender and race. In fact, it is within this perspective that scholars focus on the dialectical relationship of structure and agency, which permits an examination of the various cultural mixes that come into play when people from different countries begin to interact with each other (Levitt 2007, 130). This domain also examines the continued presence of a national identity abroad and the collective participation in cultural activities such as festivals or industries (Portes 1991, 221).

The economic approach to transnationalism is often highly concerned with remittances. Industrialized nations are often dependent on cheap labor and un-industrialized nations are dependent on the money or remittances sent back by workers abroad (Schiller 1992, 8; Levitt 2007, 6; World Bank 2016). The political nature of nation-states is also relevant to transnational migration because it impacts migrants’ social relationships and their political actions, loyalties, beliefs and identities (Schiller 1992, 8; Fox 2005, 188). Both economics and politics are major parts of Chinese immigration to Argentina and are thus important to consider in the larger context (Hussain 2005, 2; Schiller 2007, 6). My focus here is on the sociocultural approach. This means looking less at macro-issues of governments and institutions and more on personal experiences, personal anecdotes, and daily life.

The sociocultural approach to transnationalism involves cultural institutions which can both reinforce national identities and increase collective enjoyment of cultural goods (Portes 1999, 21).

The sociocultural lens of analysis also expands on the impact of migrants’ backgrounds to their

experiences. One should distinguish transnational activities that are carried out by large institutions like multinational companies and grass-roots initiatives that are carried out by immigrants, as they impact individual migrants in different ways (Portes 1999, 21). An important conversation within the sociocultural realm of transnational studies is one of the relation between the varying structures of immigrant communities and the agency that these communities have within transnational arenas (Lacroix 2013, 7). According to Morawska (2003), the structure of different immigrant communities alters the amount of agency that they have in the places they migrate to. It is important to compare the experiences of differing immigrant groups to understand the similarities and differences in the structures that form within each one. For example, in a study of Poles and Russian Jews as migrants in the United States, Morawska compares the activities of Russian Jewish immigrants to Chinese immigrants to understand how the structures of various immigrant groups affects their levels of agency. In Morawska's words:

Immigrant groups that pursue their activities outside of formal organizations do it for different reasons. The avoidance of institutional membership by Eastern Europeans is voluntary and reflects their general mistrust of the public sphere and underdeveloped civic responsibility inherited from the communist era. But whereas these characteristics are common for Russian Jewish and Polish immigrants, the former, incorporated into the established and well-organized American Jewish community, welcome the benefits of organization membership provided them "from the outside." Undocumented Chinese immigrants entrapped in New York Chinatowns remain unorganized involuntarily: they have neither the resources (education, money, power, and know-how) nor the opportunities (time and energy) to form ethnic associations). (Morawska 2003, 1403).

And this is the key to my whole project. Morawska's words point to the problematic nature of generalizing all immigrant experiences as the same. After all, each immigrant's specific sociocultural background drastically changes the way they experience the surrounding world. Moreover, it brings up the developed structure of Chinese communities that must have taken place since Morawska conducted her study. Although Chinese immigrant communities in Argentina might not be as structured as other immigrant communities in Argentina, the presence of Chinese grocery

stores, schools, and Chinatowns suggests that there is some organization. All of this suggested very clearly to me the necessity of doing ethnographic work and learning about individual experiences of Chinese immigrants in Buenos Aires.

### **Ethnographic Fieldwork**

But how would I do fieldwork among a group of immigrants infamous for being closed-off? I took a stab in the dark. In my literature review, I discovered many articles about Chinese immigration to Argentina written by an anthropologist at the University of San Martín, Dr. Luciana Denardi. I soon learned that Luciana, as I will refer to her throughout the thesis, is one of the few researchers who studies Chinese immigration to Argentina. And she turned out to be a central figure in all of my research. Not only was Luciana one of my main research sources, but she put me in contact with many other people who probably would never have spoken to me if she had not connected us. I reached out to her for the first time on March 4, 2018. Over email, I introduced myself, told her that I was a student from William & Mary studying Chinese and Latin American Studies, and that I was planning a thesis about Chinese immigration from China and Taiwan to Argentina. I told her that I had read some of her articles and was curious about her studies. I wondered if she would share with me how she carried out her work. Luciana wrote back just a day later, excited to talk more. We talked for about an hour over video chat later that month. Afterwards, we had planted the seeds for what would blossom into two-weeks of ethnographic field work in Buenos Aires.

In my ethnographic research, I ended up learning the most from interviews with Chinese migrants arranged by Luciana Denardi, as well as observations in grocery stores, Chinatown, and Chinese cultural centers. Before getting to Argentina, I thought that my ethnography would primarily consist of informal interviews and observation of grocery store owners in Buenos Aires,

but this was not the case. In December 2018, I went to Buenos Aires for two weeks, funded by a Charles Center research grant. I stayed in a cheap Airbnb about a mile away from the *Barrio Chino*. My days were characterized by a mix of attending talks related to Chinese culture or Chinese-Argentine exchange at Chinese cultural centers, visiting Chinatown, Chinese stores, and restaurants, and interviewing my interlocutors. One of the prime reasons why I was able to write this thesis was because Luciana introduced me to people she knew who were already open to sharing their stories. They were especially open to me because the person who introduced us was someone they trusted.

Through life, and academic and work experience, I have repeatedly been reminded of the importance of interpersonal connection in hearing people's stories. When people feel comfortable they are able to be more expressive and open. Before going to Argentina, I read other ethnographies so that I could learn how to conduct my own. Many people conduct participant observations and interviews with interlocutors, but by and large the ethnographies I read beforehand were collections of interesting and well-told stories about topics unrelated to my own. After I read through ethnographies, I was reminded to remain open-minded, curious, non-judgmental, and perceptive – more intentionally than I was used to. Most of all, I gathered that a lot of what I would learn would be from things impossible to expect, so I should always be prepared for my day to end up providing me with an unimaginable wealth of information. After my first day in Buenos Aires, I knew that by day's end I should prepare for a long night of note-taking and the beginnings of processing what I had just experienced.

One day that I have thought of many times since returning from Argentina was the day I met with Eva Blanco. Day 8 of field work, and I knew that the conversation I was about to have would likely be a memorable one. I had plans to meet the author of the first book ever written completely in Spanish by a Chinese immigrant to Argentina. I had heard remarkable things about Eva Blanco's kindness and charm, and while I spoke with her I learned about the power of a back

and forth conversation. Eva and I shared our life experiences with each other, and we developed a thoughtful and easy-flowing rapport which eventually allowed for deeper discussion of her life. Eva asked me how long I had studied Chinese for, and I told her just about 8 years. She asked me if I liked to read in Chinese, and I told her that I did but that I still need to have a dictionary by my side. We switched into Chinese as we began to talk about Chinese literature, and I told her about my favorite short Chinese prose story where three men go to a lake and see what they think are white butterflies but find out are white pieces of paper upon going to get a closer look. At the end of the story they all discuss how different people view the world differently, neither perspective better or worse, just both different. I told her about how I love the ballad of Mulan and what it taught me about a woman in a different era who defied her time. When I told Eva that I felt like I was not making much sense, as though I was losing my mind in my thoughts, Eva told me that what I was saying made perfect sense to her. In writing and in the world there is always a 阴 yin and 阳 yang.

This kind of easy-flowing conversation allowed us to get into a deeper conversation about Eva's life and understanding of culture. When Eva continued responding to my story about butterflies and people's perceptions of reality, her answer shed light on her experiences as a Chinese migrant in Argentina, "Thought is different in Argentina and in China, and even when ideas are similar the ways of expressing thoughts can be so different that we don't see the similarities." The difference in thinking that Eva described because of our previous exchange helped me understand why it was important to Eva to write the book *Ida* which formed the basis of my analysis in the third chapter of this thesis. Eva has a desire to express Chinese thought and her own experience of womanhood in China. I continued to ask Eva questions, unsure of the relevance of what I would hear, and ended up learning a lot about how a Chinese audience would respond to the feminist ideas she puts in her books.

I write in two languages – both in Chinese and Spanish. In China there is no commentary on the book, the book is written in Chinese mainly for Chinese living outside the country. 86 thousand reads. Argentines like the parts where the narrator is telling the story more, Chinese people don't get why the narrator is going on for so long. Chinese like more action, "today there was this, tomorrow that." In Argentina people like psychoanalysis. Everyone here is like a psychologist. They like to get into the head of Ida and the parts of the book where they can analyze who she is as a person.

The stories that Eva shared through our relaxed-style of conversation proved to be relevant to my own analysis of her work. Eva talked about writing the book in Spanish and Chinese, but I never could find a Chinese version of the book. Chinese people were not Eva's target audience, and I am still unsure if a published version of the novel exists in Chinese. Eva wrote the book mainly for Argentines interested in Chinese culture and women's experiences. Argentines who might also turn into political supporters if she decides to run for office later in life.

While our conversation at times related to other research I had done or would do relating to Chinese migration, it also served to simply connect us as two people talking to one another over tea. We talked about life plans, and when Eva asked about mine she shared her own. She asked me what I planned to do after I finished my thesis and she asked how old I was. I told her I was 21. "Wow so young. There can be so many changes in your life in this time. So many changes!"<sup>xiii</sup> I asked Eva if she thinks she will stay in Argentina, write another book and then maybe a third? She said that was absolutely right, her plan was to sell wines and write books, two things she liked doing very much. When Eva and I finished talking to each other I walked the five minutes to get back home and prepared for a long night of writing.

It turned out I would not finish writing that day. I spent the whole weekend documenting our conversation, but it turned out I was not done writing that weekend either. When I came back to the United States and struggled to find the words to share my conversation with my family over the holidays, I assumed that if I just had someone to ask me the right questions the story would come out easily. I naïvely asked my advisor if we could talk about my fieldwork so that I could start



writing the first draft of my thesis – I figured that since I had left Buenos Aires with so many field notes and pictures that my thesis had practically already written itself. Instead, I wrote out a hodgepodge of all of the thoughts I had about why I cared about my research on a document I entitled “teacup” named for my conversation with Eva. That formed the beginnings of processing and writing what would eventually turn into the start of my thesis, but much of the work still lay ahead.

This research is both interpersonal and personal. It asks us to consider our interactions with those we consider different, and it asks for introspection and reflection on our own biases which make us quick to judge what we do not yet understand. I am a 21-year-old white Jewish woman. I was born in Boston, Massachusetts, and I went to a bilingual elementary school starting in kindergarten because my mom wanted me to be able to speak Spanish. I have Tourette’s syndrome, which has made test-taking difficult and has at times made me feel self-conscious, but for the most part remains unnoticed by the people around me. I am pan/bisexual and when I came out at fourteen a vast LGBTQ+ community opened its arms to me, teaching me about activism in ways I did not previously know. When I was fourteen I also began learning Chinese because I wanted to be able to talk with the parents of my father’s sister-in law who spoke very little English. I feel close to my family, and many of my parents’ experiences informed my own curiosities. My mom was born in the United States and when she was six she moved to Puerto Rico until going to college. Because my mom grew up in a part of Latin America, I always sought to understand a part of her childhood different from my own.

I am sharing all of this because my story is part of the story. My own subjectivity is an important part of the research process. Even as a white woman born into economic comfort and stability, there are multiple communities I belong to and ways I identify. How much more, then, can I learn from talking with people who have grown up differently from me who might have even more

complex identities and experiences? By being able to speak the languages of people who have grown up differently than I, I can better understand their stories and truths. Only then can I discover for myself the commonalities between their lives and my own. I hope that this research sheds light on stories that the people around me might not know. These stories might have remained unknown to the people around me because of a language barrier, but it is possible that they remained unknown for so long simply because the people around me did not know to ask.

This thesis will provide insight into the experiences of various different Chinese migrants living in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Chapter 1 focuses on the ethnographic story of my arrival in Buenos Aires, which allows the reader to get a sense of the experiences within the community of grocery store owners in Buenos Aires, through participant observation, interviews, and stories from articles written by Chinese scholars. Chapter 2 focuses on the story of Laura, a Chinese migrant who moved to Argentina when she was a child, and the way in which language has figured into her identity formation. Chapter 3 focuses on two intertwined stories, that of author Eva Blanco and that of the protagonist of her book *Ida*, which together are a story of cultural exchange and the influence of womanhood on the Chinese transnational migrant experience.

The experience of a Chinese supermarket owner differs from the experiences highlighted in the two other chapters. No two people's lives are the same, whether they are immigrants or not and it is impossible to tell a few stories and conclude they comprise the entire immigrant experience. The different vignettes included all make up the experiences of Chinese immigrants, but they are distinct from one another just as Chinese people living in Buenos Aires are distinct from one another. Without generalizing anyone's experiences, these vignettes can point to patterns and stories felt by many within the Chinese community in Argentina as well as divisions within the community. I encourage all who read this to keep an open mind. If the imperfection in my thinking and writing leaves questions unanswered or sparks new questions, and I hope that it does, then continue the

research that has started on these pages. In order to help create a state of curiosity regarding what one might not yet understand, and also as an introduction into traditional Chinese expression, I have included one of my favorite chapters of the *Dao De Jing*, the foundational text of Daoist philosophy and religion:

### 第十九章

### Chapter 19

绝圣弃智，民利百倍；绝仁弃义，民复孝慈；绝巧弃利，盗贼无有。此三者以为文不足，故令有所属；见素抱朴，少私寡欲；绝学无忧。

Stop being holy, forget being prudent, it'll be a hundred times better for everyone. Stop being altruistic, forget being righteous, people will remember what family feeling is. Stop planning, forget making a profit, there won't be any thieves and robbers.

But even these three rules  
needn't be followed; what works reliably  
is to know the raw silk,  
hold the uncut wood.  
Need little,  
want less.  
Forget the rules.  
Be untroubled<sup>iv</sup>.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos de Argentina

<sup>ii</sup> Elisa Tsakiri; Transnational Communities and Identity, *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Volume 24, Issue 4, 1 January 2005, Pages 102–104, <https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdi090>

<sup>iii</sup> “哦，怎么小。那还可以很多改变。Muchos cambios!”

<sup>iv</sup> Interpretation by Ursula Le Guin

# Chapter 1 : A Map of Chinese Argentina

## 第一章：初探阿根廷的华人群体

“Why would you go to Barrio Chino? You can just go to a *chino* and ‘chingchingching.’” I had been in Buenos Aires for a grand total of two hours and was sitting in the kitchen of my Airbnb writing a paper when an older man, Víctor,<sup>1</sup> walked downstairs and asked me who I was. I explained that I was one of the new guests staying in the house for two weeks. He put some jam on toast and as he ate, we began to talk. He asked me what I was doing in Buenos Aires, and I told him I was doing a thesis on Chinese Immigrants in Argentina.

Víctor evidently had some disconnect between the topic of my thesis and the benefits of going to the Barrio Chino (Chinatown) in Belgrano, a nearby neighborhood of Buenos Aires. He could not understand why I wanted to go there when there were so many Chinese grocery stores nearby. Although I was only a twenty-minute walk away from Barrio Chino, I was an even closer three-minute walk to the nearest “Supermercado Chino” (Chinese Grocery Store), sometimes simply referred to as a *chino*.

Víctor seemed like a rough-around-the-edges kind of person and was an odd mix of disagreeable and very talkative. He had some conflicting thoughts about China and Chinese people. He did not see the point of me going to Barrio Chino, and over the course of my two-weeks stay he often questioned why I was doing this research at all. However, he also held a sincere curiosity about what I was learning and as time went on he would ask me questions about how my research was going. Víctor also had an exotified fascination for China. On that first morning, he told me about a visit he took to Shanghai ten years ago. He recounted going to the top of a famous tall building with

his European friend and emphasized how luxurious it all was. Víctor had his own unique peculiarities, but his behavior expressed a larger mode of thought shared by many Argentines: *chinos* are incomprehensibly different, cannot be understood, and do not belong.

Luciana Denardi (2013) explains that there are several prevalent mischaracterizations of Chinese migrants, which fuel people's prejudices. Assumptions about language in particular play a role in how Chinese people are perceived. Chinese language uses a system of phonetic tones, but the tone of voice that Chinese people use to communicate in is central to the way the language works. According to Denardi (2013), many Argentines assume that Chinese people are yelling at each other all of the time. Other assumptions include that Chinese people live above the stores where they work and turn off the store refrigerators at night to save money. Some Chinese people do live in a part of the grocery stores they work in, others do not. Many Chinese people 'live to work', but others do not, and many do so in order to send remittances back to their families abroad. The story about fridges being turned off at night appeared to be an unfounded assumption though is likely rooted in ideas about Chinese miserliness. Indeed, Chinese store owners are misunderstood by many people in Argentina and are often treated like a distinct group of people who do not belong in the country.

This chapter explores my own experiences confronting some of these stereotypes as I began navigating what I am here calling "Chinese Buenos Aires," that is, the various Chinese institutions in Buenos Aires. It will serve to introduce Chinese Buenos Aires to the reader through exploring my initial interactions with Chinese grocery stores and shops, as well as at events around Chinese institutions. This is important not only as a way to present my ethnographic "field" but also because many of my interactions help explain how Chinese people and businesses are often misunderstood. In the second half of the chapter I focus on Chinese grocery stores. By switching my focus from the people who misunderstand Chinese immigrants to the immigrants who are misunderstood, the

reader can understand why some Chinese immigrants act in a way that others perceive as closed-off. An analysis of these institutions and the complex experiences of migration tied to them give us a better sense of the ways in which Chinese stereotypes are indeed mischaracterizations, or are at least based on incorrect assumptions about Chinese people generally.

### **Observations at The ACCA (Asociación Cultural Chino-Argentino)**

Before getting to Argentina, I thought that my fieldwork would mostly consist of conversations with Chinese grocery store owners and visits to cultural centers where I would get to meet store owners outside of a workplace setting. Part of my exploration of Chinese Buenos Aires was in fact attending events promoting cultural exchange at cultural centers. One of these centers is called the Chinese-Argentine Cultural Association (ACCA), and when I went there to attend a charla (talk) on ethnic minorities, specifically focusing on Tibet, led by Luciana Denardi and Gustavo Ng, the people present had a captivating two-hour discussion. However, there was a notable absence of Chinese people at the charla. While there were one or two Chinese people at the event, none were grocery store owners, and most of the people in attendance were Argentine. Even still, in my time there I got the chance to learn about Chinese-Argentine cross-cultural interaction through conversations about the topics both related and tangential to the talk we were attending (See Fig 1.1).



**CHARLA**  
**Las minorías étnicas de Yunnan y Qinghai**

El encuentro invita a introducirse en el mundo de las **minorías étnicas de China**, en especial pueblos que habitan las provincias de **Yunnan y Qinghai**.

- **Luciana Denardi** realizará un breve análisis de las minorías étnicas de Yunnan, provincia que visitó en 2018 invitada al 3rd Yunnan Conference on International Exchange of Professionals y al Universidad de Yunnan.
- **Gustavo Ng** presentará fotos que tomó en un viaje de mayo, junio y julio de 2018 a la Prefectura de Ganca, en la provincia de Qinghai.

Sábado 8/12 a las 15:30hs. | Av. Federico Lacroze 2437  
**CUPOS LIMITADOS - Entrada: \$50**

(\*) Para los alumnos de la Asociación Sin Cargo.

Figure 1.1. Charla: Ethnic minorities of Yunnan and Qinghai

I got to the front door (See Fig 1.2) and noticed a sign with the name of the ACCA in both Spanish and Chinese above the doorway (See Fig 1.3). I walked up to the second floor, and as I walked I noticed writing on each step which described what kinds of events and services were connected to the association (See Fig 1.4). Here are some pictures of the outside and the stairs leading up to the Association:





Figure 1.2. Entrance to ACCA



Figure 1.3. ACCA Sign



Figure 1.4. ACCA Interior

I got to the second floor and when I walked into the small main lobby, I saw a desk ahead where two women sat. To my left there was a hallway, where there are language classes, and to my right was a lecture room. The room, maybe 25ft x 25ft, was already almost full, and I saw Luciana standing by the front. Luciana led a presentation on ethnic minorities in China, which brought those attending to a discussion of how culture, religion, and language all unite in art. Luciana said, this relates to the problem of the concept of culture. What is culture, she asked? According to Luciana, “Culture is a conflictive process of the construction of meaning.” She elaborated to say, “The biggest obstacle is this reinforcement of ethnic boundaries. To continue considering the culture as a list of attributes, with fixed limits, prevents thinking about inclusion process.” The room erupted into discussion before we all went into the lobby to break between presentations and chat amongst ourselves over tea and *medialunas*. I thought about how division across cultural lines also existed between Chinese immigrants and Argentines in Buenos Aires, and how the pre-existent cultural divisions within China could result in disunity within the Chinese community abroad. Even though our conversation was not focused on Chinese within Argentina, our discussion related to it easily.

During the break I began talking more with Mónica, the woman sitting next to me, and we talked more about Chinese immigration to Argentina. She told me about research she did which looked into Chinese migrant children's experiences of school in Argentina. I asked her about the phenomena I had heard about multiple times, where Chinese parents will come to Argentina, have children and then send their children back to China to live with their grandparents. After several years the children come back to Argentina but face a lot of culture shock. Hideki Morooka and Zai Liang elaborate on Fujianese emigration patterns and their impact on children, in a study of the educational consequences of migration on children left-behind in Fujian province (2009, 346). Mónica said that at times, upon getting to Argentina the Chinese student (who sits alongside other students) also comes from a very poor background and encounters extreme culture shock when in Argentina, as well as experiencing discomfort living with their parents after being far away for so long and living in a new country with a new language while trying to assimilate. During the lecture we talked about how ethnic minorities sometimes hide parts of their cultures so that society will accept them more. Mónica referenced this during our conversation and said that many Chinese children in Argentina do the same. We went back inside, and I asked if I could take a picture of a drawing Mónica had been doodling during the first half of the charla (See Fig 1.5). She smiled and laughed, gave me a big kiss on the cheek and said that I could.

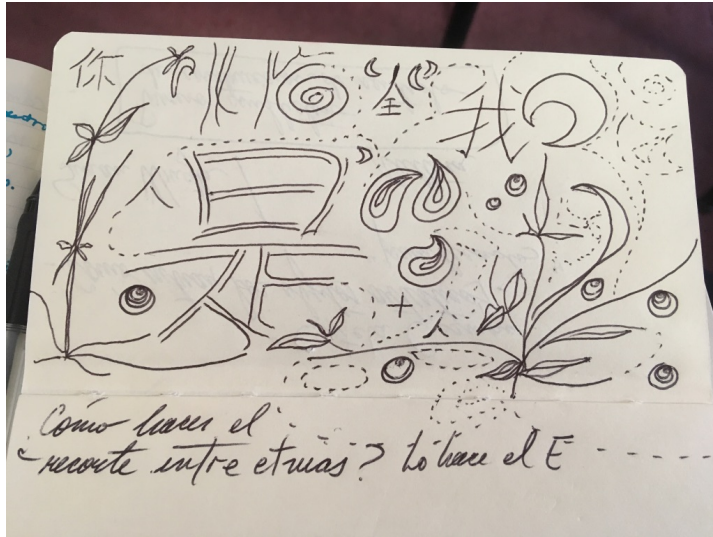


Figure 1.5. Mónica's Drawing

I like this drawing so much because it incorporates Chinese words 你, 我, 全, 是, 人. “You, Me, Complete, To be, Person.” Within this doodle lies a powerful message that no matter how different we are, we are all unified as humans. For the second half of the talk, Gustavo Ng presented photography and stories from his recent trip to China, where he went to Tibet and Xinjiang – two highly controversial autonomous regions in China. He said he became interested in this work at first because he is Chinese-Argentine, and people would use the words “chinito” and “chino” to describe him, but apart from knowing the language he did not have ties to China and felt like he didn’t really know what people meant when saying that. He wanted to learn for himself. When he was in China, he visited his dad’s cousin in addition to traveling all around the country.

Gustavo finished his talk by saying that identity is magic, “We like to see that people have different conceptions of reality than our own. We want there to be something different.” The charla finished and I took a look at some books and magazines on display. There were two Dang Dai magazines – publications created by Gustavo which deal with cross-cultural connection between Argentina and China. There were also two books: one called *Mariposa de otoño*<sup>2</sup> and the other called

*Todo lo que necesitas saber sobre China*<sup>3</sup>. Gustavo and I spoke for a few moments after the charla ended and he recommended a documentary to me about Chinese immigration to Argentina<sup>4</sup>. He started speaking in English and I was surprised that he spoke with what sounded like something resembling a British accent. On my way out, I got a flier from the ACCA that had a schedule of wellness classes that run throughout the week (See Fig 1.6). When I went down the stairs I saw two posters next to the front door (See Figs 1.7, 1.8). Although I had learned a lot about culture, identity, and Chinese-Argentine experience, it seemed like the target audience for the center was Argentines who wanted to learn more about China, not Chinese people who wanted to adjust to living in Argentina. Even the wellness classes, when I went to one, were geared toward a non-Chinese audience. When I went back to the ACCA later in the week to attend a yoga class, I learned that no Chinese people took part in either that yoga class or the Taichi class that started afterwards. The ACCA was not quite the Chinese-Argentine cultural center I envisioned it to be.

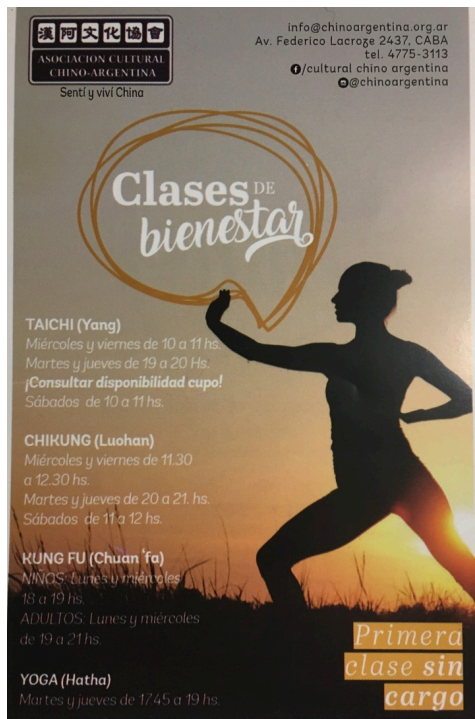


Figure 1.6. Wellbeing Classes Flier



Figure 1.7. Speak Chinese Easily Poster



Figure 1.8. Wellbeing Classes Poster

## **ETHNOGRAPHY: A WALK THROUGH CHINESE ARGENTINA**

### **BARRIO CHINO**

Chinese institutions like Chinatowns offer a clear picture of the Chinese and Taiwanese migrant experience. According to Amancay Rayén Torres, Buenos Aires' Chinatown in Belgrano (a neighborhood of Buenos Aires) is a mostly commercial space, with a concentration of cultural signs and brands, but is not a place with a rich ethnic life (Torres 2015-2016, 17). That being said, Chinatowns are still spaces where many different Chinese migrants in Argentina converge. Even though Chinatown is a place meant to attract tourists, it is also a place where migrants can share culturally significant food from their cultures and meet with each other. Furthermore, Chinatown serves as a location where institutions can strengthen ties within the migrant community (Torres 2015-2016, 6).

Denardi (2016, 34) outlines the many different Chinese organizations, like Chinatowns, in Argentina: the three largest categories are resident associations (27%), religious (20%) and economic (16%). These findings support the analysis of Chinatowns as economic and religious centers for immigrants. The Chinatown in Buenos Aires also impacts the local economy. After all, Chinatown houses shops of many types: restaurants, supermarkets, and gift shops. All of these are potential employers for Chinese migrants (Torres 2015-2016, 15). Yuan Jianping, the president of the "Pro-Unification of China Confederation in Argentina," gives a testimonial to the importance of a Chinatown: "The Chinese install markets and restaurants, above all, because they are activities in which the whole family can perform and that do not require great knowledge of the Spanish language, which almost none had when arriving to the country" (Pappier 2011, 5).

When I got to Chinatown, or *Barrio Chino*, it was colorful and packed with people. I walked down the street and saw a lot of restaurants. I saw a small walkway off the main street with a sign “Chinese massage” and I turned toward it and began to walk down. There was a teenage boy sitting down at the front of the walkway who looked like he was in his mid to late teens, and just next to him there was a really tiny store filled with Chinese dried foods. I walked in and saw a woman in her early twenties sitting behind the counter looking at her cell phone. I looked down toward the end of the store, which was about ten feet away from me, and saw some coconut milk. In front of me, there were small bags of dried food – the kind I would see at any grocery store in China. I asked the woman at the cash register, “*¿tienes dougan?*” (do you have dried tofu?) She looked up from her cell phone, to which she seemed very attached, and in Mandarin she clarified what I was asking for. I confirmed, and she told me in Spanish that she did not have any but that I spoke [Chinese] very well. I bought myself coconut milk, and we talked briefly in a mix of Spanish and Chinese about where I had studied in China. I gave her 500 pesos and waited for my change. She kept her eyes on the phone screen as she held my bill and texted someone, and about 30 seconds passed until I finally asked, in Spanish, “could I have the change?” I had given her \$450 more than the juice cost, but she was busy texting. She glanced up and monotonously said, in Mandarin, “take it easy” After about 15 more seconds she gave me change. I asked her if there was a good dumpling place nearby, and she smiled and then commented that it made sense I wanted dumplings since I studied in Beijing (and there are a lot of dumplings there). She told me that her favorite place was down the street a bit farther and I went on my way.

As I continued walking down the street, I saw a group of people standing in a cube all facing outwards, and all wearing white Guy Fawkes masks. Every other person was holding a screen on which a tortured pig was on display, and next to each of the screen-holders was a person holding a sign that said something about how the treatment of animals was cruel and had to stop. Evidently,

these activists knew that Chinatown would be busy and that by placing themselves in the center of Chinatown they would be seen by many passersby. Perhaps they also wanted to protest eating animals in a location where they knew many people would be eating meat. I kept walking and after one or two more blocks the Chinatown suddenly stopped being so lively and filled with Chinese stores and restaurants, and I realized the stretch of street that was Chinatown had ended. I walked back, noticing a Taiwan-Argentine center which was closed at that time (See Fig 1.9), and then I turned off the main road. Chinese restaurants and stores continued to line the side streets, though more sparsely, and I noticed a Chinese Christian church (See Fig 1.10). The second time I got to Barrio Chino, I noticed the look of the Chinatown archway and main walk (See Figs 1.11, 1.12, 1.13, 1.14, 1.15, 1.16, 1.17, and 1.18.) Instead of going past the archway down the main section of the Barrio Chino, on a street called Arribeños, I kept going straight on Juramento, past the railroad tracks and the arch (See Fig 1.19), until I was at an area with a few Chinese bazaars called “regalerías.”





Figure 1.9. Taiwanese-Argentine Center



Figure 1.10. Chinese Christian Church



Figure 1.11. Arch and Train Tracks



Figure 1.12. Building next to Barrio Chino Arch





Figure 1.13. Front View of Barrio Chino Arch



Figure 1.14. Barrio Chino Arch Close-Up



Figure 1.15. Barrio Chino Lion Statue





Figure 1.16. Chinese-Run Bazaar in Barrio Chino



Figure 1.17. Barrio Chino Main Street





Figure 1.18. External View of Chinese Bazaar in Barrio Chino



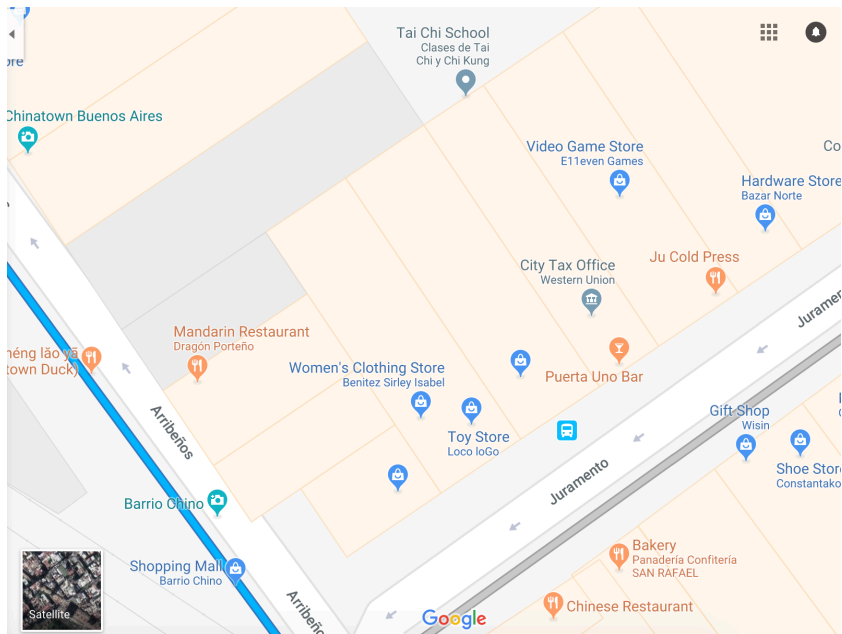


Figure 1.19. Map of Barrio Chino, at the crossing of Arribeños and Juramento.

I turned right when it seemed like there were fewer and fewer Chinese stores and restaurants (I noticed a Japanese restaurant though), and as I walked I saw a tiny restaurant with only Chinese written on it. 四川 *sichuan* food was written over the top. As I sat there, I wrote some fieldnotes:

I chose the smallest place I could find hoping that I'd be able to talk with the people who work here in Chinese and also hoping I'd be able to afford the food with the money I had leftover – but the man who came to take my order speaks Spanish and doesn't seem Chinese. Maybe I'll have a chance to speak with more people before I leave.

I did not have a chance to talk with anyone else before I left. I noticed that there was a big group of Chinese people sitting down near the end of the restaurant, who spoke a mix of Mandarin, what sounded to me like Cantonese, and the littlest ones who looked five-eight years old spoke in Spanish to each other. The woman who answered the phone in the back of the restaurant and seemed to run the business spoke both Chinese and Spanish fluently.

I walked into a bazaar that was larger than many of the others. There were two Chinese people running the store, and I did not notice until I had walked around the store for several minutes that there was an Argentine woman sitting on a tall stool near the back of the store. There was Mandarin music playing in the background, which I had not heard in many of the other Chinese stores I had visited. The Chinese man and woman spoke to each other in Mandarin and hardly spoke with anyone else. They also both sang along to the songs playing in the background, and the man would talk to himself in Mandarin now and again. The store was filled with small gifts: nail polishes, Chinese spoons and bowls, cooking utensils, knickknacks, umbrellas and more (See Figs. 1.19, 1.20, 1.21). At the very front of the store there was a set of about twenty lockable cubbies with a sign asking customers to place their belongings inside before going into the store. I thought that perhaps they have had problems with petty theft, and the cubbies prevented people from taking small items.



Figure 1.20. Bazaar Interior: Aisle



Figure 1.21. Bazaar Interior: Utensils for Sale



Figure 1.22. Bazaar Interior: Pens for Sale

I noticed a few different kinds of wine openers, and I turned to the Chinese woman stocking the shelves, asking her in Spanish if the two different kinds both did the same thing. I thought maybe this would strike up a conversation, but we only shared quick clarifying remarks before she continued restocking the shelves. I chose my item, and I walked toward the cashier's desk. There were small trinkets surrounding the desk area and I thought maybe if I stood around there long enough the man sitting behind the register would look up and I could ask him a question. The opportunity never arose as he seemed uninterested in engaging with me, so I bought my wine opener saying "gracias" and getting an "mm" in response.

I continued walking down the street where there was another "regalería" store, and I went inside, where there were a lot of clothes for sale: pants, bras, shorts, etc. (See Figs. 1.22, 1.23) There was an Argentine woman sitting near the counter who talked with a customer asking a lot of questions, and there was a Chinese woman who didn't engage in the conversation. I went over closer to the cash register, and I saw that there were some umbrellas for sale. It was raining outside and made a lot of sense to get an umbrella then, and I asked the Chinese woman behind the counter if all of them were 300 pesos (some were marked, and some were not). She responded, "sí, 300 pesos" and the conversation ended there. Not really an easy way to move from that to a deeper conversation, so I said "gracias" and kept walking. When I spoke with Argentine academics after going to Chinatown, I learned that non-Chinese workers (who are often from countries in Latin America outside of Argentina) are present to make conversing in Spanish between customers and storeowners easier.





Figure 1.23. Regalería in Barrio Chino



Figure 1.24. Clothing for Sale in Barrio Chino

Across the street there was a narrow and small bazaar where a Chinese man who looked to be in his mid-twenties was sitting by himself eating food from a plastic container behind the cash register. I thought I might be able to begin a conversation since it was only the two of us in the whole store, but he did not look up from his food and it seemed like he did not want to talk. I decided to walk back to Arribeños and make my way to the restaurant Lai-lai, which I had figured out was the restaurant the woman a few days ago told me had her favorite dumplings (See Fig 1.24). Again, the people I interacted with in this restaurant were not Chinese. Although I was not able to speak with any Chinese immigrants who worked in the restaurant, I did enjoy a delicious and authentic-tasting Chinese meal and a pot of tea (See Fig 1.25).



Figure 1.25. Lai-Lai Exterior





Figure 1.26. Chinese Tea, Argentine Peso, and Receipt for “Tofu Familiar”

After eating, I went to a couple more stores. The first was a small bazaar where I had a short conversation in Spanish with the Chinese man at the register about whether essential oil incense were safe to use on skin or not (they were not). I asked him if the products were all from China, asked if something was a bag (it was), trying to begin any kind of conversation, but he did not seem interested in a conversation, possibly in part because his Spanish was broken. When I left, I saw another store that sold tofu and walked inside (See Fig 1.26). The tofu store was lined with Chinese products – dried and preserved foods in bags, and dried Tofu of course at the counter at the end. I asked the woman in a mix of Spanish and Chinese “tienes 臭豆腐?” (do you have *choudoufu* /stinky

tofu) she looked mildly interested that I knew what *choudoufu* was but said “no” and then went back to watching something on her red iPad. I asked if she had 豆干 (*dougan* – dried tofu that often comes in bags). She responded in Spanish that the tofu at the front was *dougan*, but when I asked her if she had any in bags she said no. She went back to her iPad once more and our conversation ended.



Figure 1.27. “Springtime Tofu” Exterior

Chinese grocery store owners have a reputation in Argentina for not being interested in conversation, even among people who work with Chinese migrants. Denardi (2013) said that within the Chinese community there is a tendency to stay closed off, but when she was conducting research



she was “received with open arms in Chinese institutions, associations, churches and temples” (2013, 1). I had a similar experience. Though it was difficult to converse with many Chinese store owners, when I was formally introduced to Chinese immigrants as I conducted my fieldwork I was warmly welcomed. However, even people who work with Chinese immigrants do not always see the Chinese grocery store community as welcoming. when I went back to the ACCA to attend a well-being class, and I began talking with the Argentine woman at the front desk about my research, I mentioned that I was interested in Chinese grocery stores but was having trouble beginning conversations with store owners. She responded, “hablar con la gente en *los chinos*<sup>1</sup>!? Olvídatelo! Ellos no hablan con nadie.” (talk with the people in the grocery stores!? Forget it! They don’t talk with anyone.) But none of this is by chance, nor does it necessarily mean these people are unfriendly or closed off. Rather, as I will discuss in the following section, it is part of the larger issues of migration tied to the experiences of store owners.

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<sup>1</sup> *Los Chinos* is a term colloquially used by Argentines to refer to Chinese grocery stores



Figure 1.28. Chinese Grocery Store Aisle

## **A QUICK OVERVIEW OF CHINESE GROCERY STORES IN ARGENTINA**

While there is much diversity of Chinese immigrants in Argentina, most of those who own grocery stores come from a province in Southeast China, called Fujian. According to Mette Thunø and Frank Pieke (2005), the high amount of irregular migration from a small part of the center of Fujian province has led people to associate Chinese migrants with organized crime in both academic and popular work outside and within China. Why is Fujian associated with organized crime? Some scholars say that organized crime originated in rural Chinese secret societies, and Fujian was the birthplace of the Heaven and Earth Society, today more infamously known as the Triad (Stratfor, 2008, np). Fujianese migration became infamous primarily after two tragic events: the 1993 sinking

of a boat with Fujianese migrants, and the 2000 suffocation of several Fujianese migrants traveling to the United Kingdom (Denardi 2013, 1; Chu 2006, 397). After these events, Fujianese migrant experiences were even more equated with human trafficking and organized crime than before. However, while there was organized crime it was not involved in all migration. Some Fujianese migrants use brokers, others are helped by relatives and neighbors (2013, 1).

Once Fujianese migrants arrive in Argentina, they often stay within their community. Many of these immigrants live above their stores, and they often do not learn a lot of Spanish – just enough to run their business, which for many is their livelihood. Why is this? I posed just such a question to Deborah Huczek, a lawyer I interviewed who frequently defends Chinese store owners. For her, it is all about education. Deborah said that one thing compounding the struggles faced by grocery store owners is that many are from rural areas in Fujian, and do not have high levels of education. Many did not move past primary school, and with less education in their home country they have an even harder time adjusting to and understanding Argentina's culture. The aforementioned migration culture suggests reasons why Fujianese migrants have a tendency to remain in a close-knit somewhat insular community, which is often perceived to be closed-off.

## **MIGRATION STORIES OF GROCERY STORE OWNERS**

After my experience walking around Barrio Chino, I quickly learned that I would have to change the way I approached my research, because my plan to go into stores and immediately have profound conversations with complete strangers was not an option. I realized soon after getting to Argentina that the bulk of what I learned would not be from talking with grocery store owners. With only two weeks in Argentina, there was not enough time to establish a rapport with any of the store owners, many of whom were busy running their businesses and did not have the time to begin a long conversation. As such, while in Buenos Aires I learned about store owners mostly through

observations and conversations with other people close to them. One such person was the aforementioned lawyer Deborah Huczek. In an interview published by news outlet El Trece<sup>2</sup>, two Chinese grocery store owners explain that they thought they were migrating legally, but as soon as they realized in Brazil that they were not going to get their documents back they knew they had been tricked and were migrating illegally.

In China, a Chinese friend told us that Argentina was a good place. The friend said that Argentina has work, food, and helped us get the documents we needed, everything would be there...we paid the money in China, not here. 6 thousand dollars... Then we got to Brazil and a person met us and collected our passports, documentation, and cell phones and said that we should follow them. When we got to Argentina they didn't give any of it back to us.

Deborah Huczek explains that Chinese migrants are often tricked by snakeheads - people who lead a group of migrants across country borders. According to the new report, the snakehead who led these two migrants was armed with pistols, and the two migrants described the entire experience of traveling to Brazil from China, and then to Argentina from Brazil as scary. They did not know where they were, so they had to follow the person who led them. A conversation with Deborah about two main cases she litigated shed light on what I was not able to ascertain through observations and provided insight into some of the difficulties Chinese grocery store owners come up against.

Aside from the mafia and extortion case Deborah told me about first, she said that there was another key case important to include when discussing Chinese grocery store owners' rights. This second case deals more with migratory questions, and how Chinese citizens deal with issues of citizenship in Argentina. The memorable case Deborah told me about was one where 400 Chinese storeowners with Argentine citizenship became stateless as a result of the actions of a politically corrupt judge's clerk. According to Deborah, the clerk had prejudices against Chinese people and forged a judge's signature. This passed a law which stripped Argentine citizenship from hundreds of

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<sup>2</sup> "Tráfico de chinos a la Argentina: así es la ruta del engaño" El Trece.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G6WA\\_V-5SOc&t=1397s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G6WA_V-5SOc&t=1397s)

store owners who were forced to relinquish their Chinese citizenship 10 years beforehand when they became Argentine citizens, as the Chinese government does not allow for dual-citizenship (Clarín, 2017).

These migrants then had neither Chinese nor Argentine citizenship and were “apátrida” or stateless. When a person is stateless, they lose all of their civil and political rights. These were people who had already voted in Argentine elections and bought property in Argentina, but with this change in citizenship status they lost those rights. After one year of statelessness, Deborah was finally able to win the case and the 400 migrants got their citizenship back. However, a year is a long time go without rights, and a lot of damage had already been done. For example, a Chinese woman living in Argentina with elderly parents living in China could not visit her sick father. Because she had no citizenship, she would not have been able to cross the borders in the airport. She was trapped in Buenos Aires, and her father died without her there. The importance of respecting, valuing and taking care of elders and parents in Chinese culture only compounded how upsetting this was for the land-locked Chinese woman. At the time I spoke with Deborah, this woman’s mother had recently fallen sick as well. Luckily, although the process of getting documents back took a long time, she had gotten them sent back a couple of days prior to my conversation with Deborah and would be able to go back to China to see her mother.

Deborah sounded very frustrated with this situation. “Corruption prejudices the people not linked to the corruption at all.” The Chinese people are hurt because of the corruption of the *funcionaria* (civil servant), and in the meantime, the *gestores* (agents) who help Chinese people with their documents charge high fees for their work, victimizing the Chinese migrants even further. Deborah said that one positive coming out of all of this is that there are beginning to be international conversations about statelessness, and how people who are stateless can become refugees of a sort, when they legally “belong” to no country.

Deborah said that it personally hurts when Argentines say such ignorant things about the Chinese community, because she is so connected to it, but that sometimes people form misconceptions in part because the community is so closed-off. Deborah's connection was through her own personal story. She told me that when she was in law school she also began working in a Chinese grocery store as a cashier. Her dad always had a fascination for Chinese culture and language, and so did she. When she was working there, she ended up meeting her husband who owned the store. He is Chinese and the two of them now have 3 children together. After becoming a criminal lawyer, she worked a lot on migratory rights and opened her own practice (with the help of her husband), called Estudio INA. The idea behind the name and firm, is that INA would be a collaborative firm that united China and Argentina, the letters in the word INA based on the overlapping letters of the two words: ch**INA**rgentina. Her firm runs workshops that help Chinese migrants understand Argentina's labor laws which are very different than China's. There are also many unions and there is a culture of unionizing in Argentina that does not exist in China, and INA helps Chinese migrants adjust. Deborah's story goes to show the impact of having an open mind when approaching people of different cultures, rather than assuming that because they are different or initially cautious that they are completely closed off. She began working in a Chinese grocery store with a fascination for Chinese culture, and the people she met there quite literally became her family.

## **DIFFICULTIES WITHIN THE GROCERY STORE COMMUNITY**

Chinese grocery store owners must often face extortion and other forms of abuse. As a criminal lawyer representing victims of the mafia, Deborah works to solve conflicts especially related to extortion. The first case she spoke to me about related to the Chinese mafia. She said that the mafia would threaten grocery store owners with extreme violence, and many Chinese grocery store

owners were killed. She said that because the Chinese store owner community is perceived by Argentines as closed-off, there were not many lawyers interested in representing them. She already had connections to the Chinese community, particularly to grocery store workers, and she took on the case. She gave me two examples of how problems of extortion manifest. In the first example, the mafia would demand an amount of money claiming that it was for “protection” when in reality it was known to be the amount demanded to not hurt the store owners. Or, the mafia would leave extortion letters underneath the doors of businesses for owners to find. Sometimes the mafia would use the front of a “group of businesspeople” to cover up their criminal activity. I wondered if there were other organizations which united grocery store owners as some sort of community. If many organized communities were associated with the mafia, then how do Chinese grocery store owners actually gather? Deborah said that there are some forms of organization, but whether true or not many people still suspect that they are affiliated with the mafia.

Today Deborah works together with Chinese grocery store owners with relative ease, but the process of getting there was difficult, and she had to gain their trust. Victims of the mafia did not initially want to share their experiences, and they did not trust translators, who were necessary to speak with police and lawyers, for they believed they also worked for the mafia. After Deborah was able to gather trustworthy translators who worked either for the police or for judges, it was easier to get grocery store owners to share their experiences. Once that system was in place, the entire process of carrying out any kind of work between grocery store owners and Deborah’s firm was much easier. This is one example of how grocery store owners did not stay closed off after they knew she could be trusted and suggests that Chinese store owners are so hesitant to talk with people outside of their community at least in part because of distrust and fear.

While it is important to emphasize that organized crime is not a defining factor in Chinese migrants’ lives, I would be remiss to overlook the similarities between Deborah’s story and the

stories of Chinese migrants written about by Chinese academics. One grocery store that I visited in Buenos Aires, seemed to be run by less well-off people (See Fig 1.28, 1.29). There was a young girl playing by herself at the front, and a man who appeared to be her dad at the cash register. Behind the register was a lot of stuff piled together in an area with a sleeping pad that the young girl periodically lay down on and played games in. This store was filled with all kinds of products – wine, shampoo, soaps, foods, yogurt, fresh vegetables and fruit. I walked around the whole store and got myself some shampoo, conditioner and soap. While it is possible that her father simply wanted to have the daughter around to do work and play under his supervision, a second possibility is that he did not have a lot of money and his daughter spent her time in the store because that was the most economical place for her to be. It is worth pondering what effects looting might have on people who may not have much money, and how a fear of being robbed could influence a store owner to become more guarded. After all, when I went to check out, I wondered if the man behind the counter would say anything to me. It did not seem like he would, as he kept his interactions with other customers brief and to the point. I saw how much I owed him on the register screen and gave him cash. He gave me change. I said “gracias” and he slightly nodded his head in my direction before moving on to the next customer.





Figure 1.29. Chinese Grocery Store Exterior

Figure 1.30. Chinese Grocery Store Entrance

The following testimonials compiled by Chinese academics are examples of the various difficulties that Chinese grocery store owners face in Argentina. Huang Yinghu states that Chinese supermarkets hold an important position in the grocery store industry, making up 37% of that entire industry in Argentina. He then talks about the various difficulties that Chinese store owners face in Argentina. In the following example, a store owner Mr. Li operates 4 different Chinese grocery stores. He is probably someone with a lot of money, as millions of dollars were stolen. However, when a storeowner who doesn't have a lot to begin with has their business looted, the consequences could be severe and negatively impact their lives.

On the evening of December 20, there were about 40 to 50 Chinese supermarkets in the city of Rosario alone. At least 10 supermarkets and adjoining houses were looted, and 4 male overseas Chinese were injured and hospitalized. Among them, Mr. Li Yuqing operates 4 supermarkets, three of which were looted, the damage estimated to be between 3 and 4 million USD.<sup>5</sup> (Huang 2014, 2)

Two words in this example that are important to explain further are the Chinese terms 洗劫一空 (Xijieyikong) and 抢劫一空 (qiangjieyikong). Both of these words translate to mean to loot, but more vividly “to empty out in a robbery” and imply that the stores are not just held up briefly by one or two robbers. Rather, the robberies are likely well-planned, large, carried out by many people at once, and leave nothing in the store. From having their stores robbed to being attacked and killed for no other reason besides being Chinese, grocery store owners face a unique set of challenges that other Chinese migrants to Argentina do not always encounter. Mr. Li had a lot of money and several stores, and most likely was able to continue operating even after being robbed, however many grocery store owners arrive with very little money and their stores make up their livelihood.

A few more stories included in Huang's article continue to shed light on other difficulties that Chinese grocery store owners face: "In addition, there have been some vicious incidents of extortion and kidnapping of overseas Chinese in Argentina. In 2009, in the capital city of Buenos Aires, the police sabotaged a criminal group specializing in extorting Chinese supermarkets" (Huang 2014, 2).<sup>6</sup> This case shows that Chinese grocery stores are not just looted, but also face extortion and kidnapping. This extortion looks similar to what Deborah described earlier: letters are left for grocery store owners to find, and if the owners do not comply with what is in the letter they face retribution in the form of violence. The threats of violence against Chinese store owners further escalates in the following example:

On December 9, 2013, on a social networking site in Argentina, some people incited to "rob the Chinese, have a good Christmas." It was claimed that it was necessary to rob Chinese shops on the 19th and 20th days. At one time, more than 4,000 people expressed their willingness to participate, and 17,000 people were interested.<sup>7</sup> (Huang 2014, 3)

This post shows that in Argentina there is already an idea that Chinese grocery stores are an easy place to rob. Furthermore, it suggests that there is no consequence to expressing intent to commit a crime against a Chinese person and that the crimes are not taken seriously. The safety and security of Chinese immigrants is not taken into account by the people who begin these events. It would make sense if many Chinese store owners felt threatened, scared or unsupported by a larger Argentine community that perceives them as unfriendly even as they are the targets for hate crimes.

It is important to note that in 2013, Argentina was in an economic recession and inflation was continuing to increase. This economic downturn could create a sense of resentment toward Chinese storeowners who are still successfully running their businesses, when Argentines are losing money and struggling. To add on to this, tensions run particularly high during the Christmas season and for the past several years there have been many protests in December because policies are often quickly passed at the end of the year. When people are already tense and upset, it makes sense that they would want to retaliate against someone, and Chinese stores are an easy target: the economy

might be bad, but at least they get something for the Christmas season. The next example shows much more than the threat of violence. In this example, a Chinese storeowner is killed when leaving his store after an unsuccessful blackmail attempt.

Around 9:30 pm on September 7, 2010, a 29-year-old overseas Chinese man was preparing to cross the street to drive home after leaving a Chinese supermarket in Villa Dominico in the Avellaneda partido in Buenos Aires, when two men suddenly stopped him. Without saying anything, they fired 17 shots at him, causing him to die on the street. After the gunmen murdered him, they took a motorcycle waiting at the corner of the street and escaped. Since the cash, necklaces and cars being driven by the murdered man were not taken away by the perpetrators, the police ruled out the possibility of robbery, and therefore suspected that this might be a retaliatory action taken by the criminal gang after extortion. In the previous seven or eight months, Argentina also had several attacks and kidnappings against overseas Chinese, causing many deaths and injuries.<sup>8</sup> (Huang 2014, 2)

The fear that Chinese grocery store owners form as a result of these crimes is far reaching and likely makes it more difficult to assimilate in Buenos Aires which impacts the perception of store owners as closed-off. This quote shows that store owners do not only need to worry about blackmail and robbery but have to worry about more extreme violence that could happen to them as a result of being Chinese in Argentina. Not only are stores targeted for robberies as was shown in the previous examples, but storeowners are targeted for hate crimes. It makes sense that Chinese store owners would resist assimilating into a society where there is the danger of being robbed, blackmailed, kidnapped, and even killed. These negative aspects of Argentina's society can have wide-reaching impacts on the whole Chinese community, making Chinese store owners feel unsafe and encouraging them to stay within their community. As such, the stereotype that many Argentines have of Chinese store owners being closed-off seems short-sighted and does not reflect the issues of personal safety that are often at play when business owners act in one way or another. If Chinese store owners are to assimilate into Argentina's society, Argentina should also take action to help Chinese storeowners feel safer.

According to Tang Feng Hua, overseas Chinese migrants think it would be helpful to the community to localize so that it is more assimilated into Argentina's society. However, when storeowners face such violence and crime, they are likely to assimilate with caution. The following example outlines some other reasons why grocery store owners have a hard time assimilating into Argentina's society.

The Chinese supermarket industry has strengthened communication and integration with mainstream Argentine society on the level of language and culture, forming a unique "supermarket culture." "New Chinese immigrants in Argentina have very little Spanish... They are busy opening stores and therefore have little time to learn Spanish classes, but only know a small amount of Spanish language related to their careers." <sup>9</sup> (Tang 2012, 4)

Evidently, Chinese store owners also have a harder time assimilating than immigrants who come already knowing Spanish, because there is a language barrier that prevents cross-cultural communication. That being said, the grocery store community is still taking steps to assimilate more into Argentina's society. What can people outside of that community do to facilitate this process? It is important to include Chinese academics' research in this analysis because it provides a perspective that has yet to be brought into the majority of existing literature on Chinese migration to Argentina. The violence talked about in news outlets in Argentina, while it may be sensationalized, is corroborated by Chinese scholars.

Importantly, it is Chinese academics who write about the violent treatment of Chinese grocery store owners, rather than academics who write in Spanish or English. Not even the people I interviewed in Argentina mentioned this violence. Why might it be the case that only Chinese authors find such incidences worth reporting about? In other words, why do Chinese academics writing about the overseas Chinese experience in Argentina focus on telling the stories of Chinese grocery store owners who are the victims of violent crimes while Spanish-language literature largely focuses on immigrant identity formation and English-language literature works through a transnational theoretical framework? Perhaps the detailed narratives included in the Chinese articles were only attainable

because they were gathered by people with connections in China to the community itself. Or, maybe it is in the interests of Chinese academics to write about the negative experiences of overseas Chinese so that the people within China know what they might face if they move elsewhere.

### **Lucky Bamboo: Ethnographic Hope**

But not every store owner ignored me. Partway down the main street in Chinatown, I saw a bamboo store called Lucky Bamboo. I walked inside and there was bamboo of all different sizes in vases of water. There were also small decorative cacti in the center of the store. A Chinese woman who looked to be in her fifties or sixties was behind a glass counter, and on top of the counter there were very small stalks of bamboo. There was an Argentine woman near the back of the store who seemed like she might work there because she was not looking at any of the products and was just standing around by the back. I went up to the counter and in Spanish I asked the Chinese woman if all of the bamboo was from China. She said that it was and seemed a bit more interested in a conversation than other store workers I had tried to talk with in the past. She looked up at me and smiled when she spoke.

I confirmed with her in Spanish that the price of one small bamboo piece was thirty pesos. She said that it was. I asked her if she was also from China, and she said she was from Taiwan. She said that her Spanish was not great, and then I asked, “hablas mandarin?” (do you speak Mandarin?) She seemed intrigued by the question and said she did. That was when I switched languages and said, “我是一个中文学生。” (I am a student of Chinese). Her face brightened, and she asked me where I studied Chinese. I told her that I am from the United States and I study it at school, but I also went to China to study. We continued to have a back and forth in Mandarin for about twenty minutes, spanning many topics.

We began by talking more about the bamboo she was selling. I told her that I was going home back to the United States in just over a week, and I would love to bring back bamboo, but I did not want it to die on the way home without water. She asked me how long my flight back home was, and I told her I would be traveling for about twenty-five hours. She recommended I use cotton to help keep the bamboo moist. When I did not understand the word “cotton” in Chinese she quickly switched to Spanish, just for that word, and continued describing how to use it in Chinese.

She continued to talk a bit about travels that she has done in the past, and how she has taken stalks of bamboo as well as orchids with her on planes. She explained, she knew she was not supposed to, so she was a little worried about the airport security workers finding the plants, but she wrapped them in newspapers and no one even opened her bags! She laughed as she shared her small conquest, having bypassed airport security to bring flowers to her friends in Miami and with her traveling in Costa Rica. I asked her about why she visited those places and she said she is Buddhist and went up north to practice her religion.

I asked her if she likes living in Argentina, and she said that she does. She has lived here 28 years and is used to being here now. She likes Argentine people and enjoys the weather and environment. She said she likes when it rains, though I didn’t quite understand her full explanation of why. She gave me instructions for how I should take care of my bamboo while in Argentina. “Put it in water, mineral water, but not the kind of mineral water you drink, just water with minerals in it. The best is rainwater, but if the water is blackish you shouldn’t use it.” I thanked her for the instructions and asked her if she was going to be working there later in the week. She told me she is going to Bolivia soon, but she will be here for the rest of the week. She mentioned her granddaughter. We said goodbye, and shared smiles with each other as I left.

As I walked through a part of Chinese Argentina - Barrio Chino, Chinese grocery stores and Chinese cultural centers, I noted the impact of Chinese institutions on immigrant identity formation.

At times, institutions like grocery stores were referenced by Argentines alongside prejudicial remarks regarding the people who run them. While grocery store owners are targeted by those with racial prejudices against Chinese migrants, an account of the difficulties that Chinese migrants face in their passage to and arrival in Argentina provides an explanation for why the Chinese community acts in a way that is perceived as insular. Through anecdotal accounts of discriminatory crimes against the Chinese community, the included Chinese-language research suggests that storeowners do not always open up easily as they live their lives with a certain amount of fear. The Chinese cultural association I visited encouraged cross-cultural engagement, but the goal of the center itself did not appear to be assisting Chinese migrants adjust to life in Argentina. An ethnographic description of Barrio Chino illustrated a map of Chinese Argentina and provides the audience a visual from which they can then explore questions of identity and belonging among Chinese immigrants to Argentina who are both present and absent in these institutions. Are there other institutions which help Chinese migrants adjust to life in Argentina instead? Workshops like the one run through the Estudio INA law firm help Chinese migrants adjust to life in Argentina. What else can be done to support the Chinese store owner community in Buenos Aires? And the question I would most like to find out - How best can someone learn the stories of people within the Chinese store owner community in Buenos Aires if many keep their stories to themselves?



Figure 1.31. Lucky Bamboo



## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> A pseudonym is being used to keep this person's identity anonymous.

<sup>2</sup> Mariposa de otoño (Autumn Butterfly): About Gustavo's travels between Argentina, New York City (where he lived as a teenager) and China.

<sup>3</sup> Translation: Everything that you need to know about China

<sup>4</sup> Documentary: <http://encuentro.gob.ar/programas/serie/9206/9208>

<sup>5</sup> 12月20日晚上,仅罗萨里奥市就有约40至50家华人超市遭到冲击,至少有10家超市和毗连的住宅被洗劫一空,4名男性华侨受伤住院。其中李玉清先生经营的4家超市中,就有3家被抢劫一空,损失估计约达300到400万美元。

<sup>6</sup> 此外,阿根廷还发生一些敲诈勒索和绑架华侨的恶性事件。2009年,在首都布宜诺斯艾利斯,警方就捣毁一个专门敲诈勒索华人超市的犯罪集团

<sup>7</sup> 2013年12月9日,在阿根廷社交网站上,又有人煽动“抢了中国人,过个好圣诞”,号称要在19、20两天抢劫华人商店,一度有4000多人表示愿意参加,1.7万人关注

<sup>8</sup> 2010年9月7日晚上9点半左右,布宜诺斯艾利斯省阿韦亚内达市多米尼科镇一家华人超市打烊后,一名29岁的华侨男子横跨街道准备去开车回家时,两名男子突然将他拦住,二话不说就朝他连开17枪,使之当场命丧街头,枪手行凶后坐上一辆等候在街角的摩托车逃逸。由于遇害男子随身携带的现金、项链和所驾驶的汽车都没有被行凶者掠走,警方排除了抢劫行凶的可能性,并且因此怀疑,这可能是犯罪团伙敲诈勒索不成后采取的报复行动。此前的7、8两个月,阿根廷也接连发生多起针对华侨的袭击和绑架事件,造成多人死伤

<sup>9</sup> 华人超市业界在语言文化层面上加强与阿根廷主流社会的交流与整合,形成独有“超市文化”。“阿根廷华人新移民掌握的西班牙语很少……他们忙着开店因而很少有时间去学习西班牙语课程,只是掌握少量与他们职业相关的西班牙语

## Chapter 2 : Language and Identity

### 第二章：语言和身份

I hurried into the Abasto Shopping Center, fifteen minutes after the interview was supposed to begin, and looked around for Laura. Before the interview, I knew Laura had lived in Buenos Aires for about 30 years. I knew that she worked as a doctor of some sort, and that she sometimes worked as a Spanish-Chinese interpreter. The Abasto was ornate and colorful. I made my way to the top floor, where the food court was, and passed by large vibrantly colored statues and decorations. We met outside of a Burger King and then walked over to the center of the food court where there were many tables and chairs, and both got something to drink. She got a coffee and I got a tea and we paid separately.

Soon we found ourselves deep in conversation, laughing and sharing ideas about different things. This conversation was sometimes in Spanish, other times in Chinese. The language switches never seemed to be unrelated to what Laura was saying, or even how she was saying it. The Spanish seemed to point toward a very logocentric, chronological ordering of her life, while her use of Chinese seemed to lend itself to more poetic musings as Laura reflected on her own life and the philosophies that guided it. Yet it became clear quite quickly that neither of these worlds, which she accessed through differentiated uses of language, were distinct from each other. Through language, Laura was a part of both worlds, each of them reflected through a nuanced sense of belonging. This is because language is often fundamentally linked to identity (Blommaert 2006, Hornberger 2007, Moyer 2007, Preece 2016, Warriner 2007, Sartori 2015.) And it seems true that for Laura, language was not just a utilitarian tool for communication but rather a major part of her understanding of her own belonging.

This chapter is an exploration of the conversation I had with Laura in an attempt to understand how language figures into her own understanding of herself, and the implications of this for other immigrants with similar experiences. It is a collection of stories that, as told by Laura, show what she considers important in her life. It is about a dual sense of identity expressed through language, which forms through sometimes conflictive life experiences. The first section of this chapter will introduce who Laura is and the meaning of the phrase 落葉歸根 (*luò yè guī gēn*), which Laura used to define her experience. The second section will focus on the Spanish-language portion of my conversation with Laura, while the third section will elaborate on the content of the conversation after Laura switched to speaking in Mandarin, focusing especially on how this content helps to understand her sense of identity and belonging as a Chinese woman living in Argentina. The fourth section of this chapter is an analysis which elaborates on the use of the phrase 落葉歸根 (*luò yè guī gēn*) within the context of Laura's stories. In it, I will explore how the language a person chooses to speak, when they speak more than one language, points to the way they understand their identity and sense of belonging after moving to a new country. In this section, I will put Laura's story in connection with other Asian-American stories and will analyze the shift in the style of conversation between Laura and myself as we switched from speaking in Spanish to speaking in Mandarin Chinese.

### **Part 1: Introduction to Laura and *luò yè guī gēn***

Laura, a Chinese woman in her late 30s, is an immigrant who has stayed connected to her home country while also planting new roots in Argentina. Luciana connected the two of us, as she thought Laura's story would teach me a lot about Chinese migration. However, Luciana and Laura are friends above anything else, so they had never done formal interviews with one another. Laura came to Buenos Aires in 1981, when she was seven years old. Her uncle worked there already, in

“trámites,” dealing with transit documentation that helped people go between countries. She arrived with her parents and sibling, as well as her uncle, aunt, and their two children who were twelve and five at the time. Eight people in total. When Laura arrived, she began first grade with students who already all lived in Buenos Aires. All native Spanish speakers. Laura came to Argentina knowing no Spanish at all and struggled with being thrown into a classroom where she did not understand or speak the language of instruction. She studied very hard, mostly learning from classroom instruction rather than from conversations with other students after school. After just getting to Argentina Laura and her classmates did not intermingle much. Laura said that the other students looked at her differently, like they knew she was a foreigner, a “chino” who did not belong.

As time passed Laura integrated into Argentine society, eventually going to medical school and getting a degree in psychiatry. She said she enjoys her job as a psychiatrist, working with patients she feels she can help. However, Laura also expressed frustrations with the darkness the job can hold. When she is working with patients who have conditions like schizophrenia, it is difficult for her to not be pulled into a dark world and a dark mind that she would rather not explore. Because of that, lately Laura has begun working more in the field of translation. She often interprets for Chinese women who are pregnant. In other words, today it seems that Laura has found her footing in her personal life as well as professional. She is married to a Taiwanese man and has two kids<sup>i</sup>. She is comfortable in Argentina and is able to navigate with ease in the country she has lived in for most of her life.

This is not to say, however, that she feels Argentine. In fact, in my conversation with Laura she made it quite clear that she often feels like an outsider – usually referred to by Argentines as a “china” that is, a “Chinese.” While Laura does not feel like she belongs fully in Argentina, she also does not feel like she completely belongs in China. Even though she remains closely connected to her Chinese heritage, China feels unfamiliar and new to her when she visits. Laura told me a story

about her mom that illustrated this sense of unfamiliarity and unbelonging: Laura's mom has lived in Argentina for many years, but, like Laura, always as a "chino," someone inherently not Argentine. Yet upon returning to China for a visit, she felt she did not belong there either. The country had changed immensely; cities in China had already undergone rapid growth. Laura said that her mom's experience paralleled her own, and the last time she was in Nanjing in 2012, there were only a few subway lines but that many parts of the city were different than she remembered. I told her that when I was there just six years later, in 2018, there were almost ten. She did not seem surprised. Because of so much rapid development in China, within just a few short years a person's hometown can become unrecognizable to the people who left it for elsewhere, whether another country or even another part of China.

After talking about Laura's mother's experience visiting China, I wondered whether the other people in her family had decided to stay in Argentina. So, I asked Laura about her aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, husband and children. She told me many of them still live in Argentina, but with regards to what people would do in the future, she really did not know. Maybe some will decide to leave Argentina, she said, maybe go to the United States or back to China, maybe elsewhere, but at least in relation to her own children, who are still in primary school, it is too soon to tell. For now, her close family is all in Argentina. When I asked Laura if her parents ever considered moving back to China, she responded with the *chéngyǔ* (four character idiom): 落葉歸根 *luò yè guī gēn* (a leaf falls, returning to the roots). This and another phrase she used multiple times throughout the interview, “我的家是我亲人住的地方”(my home is where my close family lives), together illustrate the contradicting notions of home that Laura holds simultaneously. The ideas of home, identity, and belonging that are associated with both phrases will be reflected on throughout each story Laura shared in our conversation.

When Laura told me about the leaf returning to the roots, we were still speaking in Spanish, and Laura did not yet know that I spoke and wrote in Chinese. Still, I asked if she could write down the words for me. I like the way that Chinese characters look, and I wanted to see them written in her handwriting. A calligraphy teacher once told me: “you can tell a lot about a person from their calligraphy.” He then told me he could tell I had a “childlike spirit” because my handwriting looked like something written by a five-year old. Partly because I wanted to see Laura’s handwriting, partly because I did not want to see my own handwriting, and partly because it seemed like the natural thing to do, I handed Laura my notebook and pen. She wrote in traditional Chinese characters, underneath which she included the phonetic pinyin: *Luò yè guī gēn*, meaning “all things go back to their source eventually.”

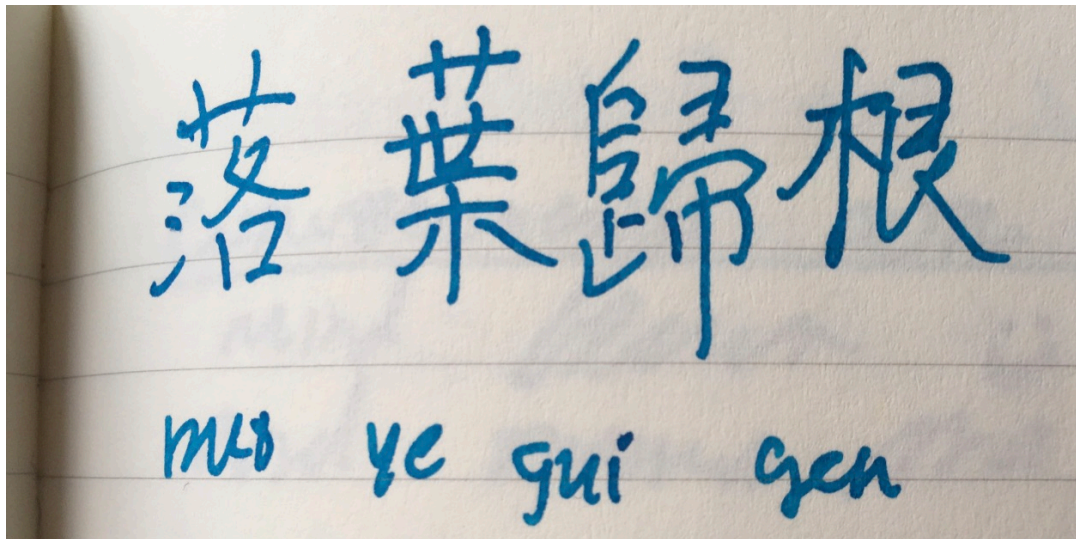


Figure 2.1. Luò yè guī gēn

When I first learned about the idiom I misunderstood what it meant. In fact, the phrase is quite complex, and can be understood in English in at least four different ways:

落葉歸根 : *luò yè guī gēn*

- a. The falling leaves settle down on the roots
- b. A falling leaf returns to the roots
- c. A person residing elsewhere finally returns to their ancestral home
- d. In old age, an expatriate returns home

When I first heard the phrase, I understood it to mean that if the tree were uprooted and moved elsewhere then the leaves would fall to the new place. However, this initial misunderstanding was in part because I had overlooked the implications of *how* Laura used the phrase. In fact, Laura said *luò yè guī gēn* at a very specific moment in our conversation to show that no matter where the tree moved the roots would stay in China. However, as Laura's roots remain in China, her home exists outside of China, in the place where her close family is. Is it possible for the roots to exist where the home does not? If so, what kinds of difficulties might a Chinese immigrant face as they create a home in a place outside of China? Laura's story and use of Spanish and Chinese begin to answer these questions, as they explore how she adjusted to and made Argentina her home.

## **Part 2: Conversing in Spanish**

The conversation began in Spanish. And Laura seemed a bit reserved, keeping her answers to a few words or short sentences. Using Spanish, I introduced myself when we met in the mall food court, and we made small talk until we had both sat down at a small round metal table. I asked Laura if it would be okay if I took notes while we spoke, and after she agreed I took out my journal and pen. I began by asking Laura when she had come to Buenos Aires, as I wanted to get a better understanding of her entire experience, starting from her childhood. The question was straightforward, and we were just beginning to converse. As we spoke in Spanish, Laura's answer followed a linear structure, detailing the time she arrived, the people with whom she came, and her years of schooling, starting with first grade. She then skipped ahead many years and told me about the progression of her career. Laura shared factual details to paint a picture of the ins and outs of her life since coming to Argentina,

but what she shared stayed focused on her external world. She told me about the struggles of the people she works with, but her own struggles and the emotional difficulty of going through them remained obscured for the time being. Her answers, while detailed and informative, carried an air of formality, and our conversation held the tension that conversations with strangers can hold at their outset. The linearity of the conversation was not at all a result of difficulties communicating in Spanish. In fact, Laura's fluent Spanish was marked by an Argentine accent.

### Chinese students in Argentina

When we spoke in Spanish, Laura gave in-depth answers that focused on other people's lives. Laura and I began to talk about how children adjust psychologically to being in Argentina, and I got to hear her expertise on the matter both as a Chinese immigrant and as a psychiatrist. Although these cases do not pertain to Laura's own upbringing, they still shed light on the experiences of Chinese people she works with and influence how she reflects on her own life. We spoke about the phenomenon where Chinese adults will move to Buenos Aires, have children, and then send their children back to China. Later in life, the children will move back to Buenos Aires to live with their parents again. Laura's perspective on the matter, no doubt influenced by her work as a psychiatrist, incorporated behavioral assessments of children, feelings of guilt in parents, and different ways these children could be treated psychologically. She told me about some of her cases working with immigrant children who came back to Argentina after spending time in China, and then had difficulties concentrating at school. When she cited these cases, she said that the problems children faced often stemmed from behavioral issues and were not intrinsically related to the children moving back and forth from China to Argentina and vice versa. Nevertheless, Laura said that parents of these children often blamed themselves. They felt like because they sent their kids back to China, they were responsible for any behavior issues arising later. Parents would feel especially guilty about



their absence in their children's lives upon learning that the treatment for this kind of condition is for children to be accompanied more often by their parents. This section shows that Laura works with people who have come from China and are struggling. Perhaps she sees in them a similar struggle to something she faced when she first got to Argentina. However, I would not know for sure yet, because Laura was still not telling her own story, she was telling the story of what she does. She works with children, cares about education, and has a career as a mental health professional. Why did she decide to do those things, and how did her Chinese identity impact her desire to focus on these topics both in life and in our conversation? I learned a little bit more as we spoke in Spanish, but I would learn the most after we switched to Chinese.

Laura began to connect the experiences children had to her own life, but unlike later in the conversation when we would bounce from topic to topic, there was a natural and logical flow to this part of our conversation. We started out still talking about Laura's clients, but then began talking about Chinese schools in a way that suggested familiarity with them. Perhaps she went to one, or she sends her children to them. If nothing else, Laura understands their role in a Chinese immigrant's life to help them find a sense of belonging in a new country. Laura pointed out that sometimes children who have a hard time focusing in class not for specific behavioral issues but simply because not every student likes school and wants to give much attention to it. She explained that sometimes students who come from China are really hard workers, and by Laura's accomplishments I could tell she was one of them. Laura talked about all of the schooling that Chinese students often do outside of their regular education. She told me that many Chinese students attend something called a *Colectividad* in addition to public school. *Colectividades* are Chinese and Taiwanese schools where students study Chinese language. *Colectividades* are organizations designed to teach Chinese immigrants of later generations about their heritage, language and culture (Ho 2011, 9). In doing so, they also create a space where Chinese immigrants can share their common experiences. They are

one way that a Chinese community can form, and that Chinese immigrants can begin to converse with their friends about how they identify and experience belonging. By talking about Chinese schools our conversation began to turn to one more focused on belonging, but for the time being the conversation was still focused on external and institutional reflections of belonging rather than Laura's personal experience with it.

### Approaching belonging

Still speaking in Spanish at this point, Laura said that she personally feels a sense of belonging to Argentina but that not all Chinese people do. We continued by talking about how various different Chinese communities exist within Argentina, and that it is harder to broach this subject as a stranger to certain Chinese immigrants who stay in more insular communities. I remarked that I was realizing how many Chinese migrants' experiences were very different from one another, and Laura agreed. She recognized at many points through the interview that her experience was very different than the experiences of some of the patients she worked with through her psychiatry and interpreting professions.

I explained that I initially planned to focus my research on the experiences of Chinese immigrants working in grocery stores, but I was having difficulty doing so because of how disinterested in conversation people at the grocery stores often seemed. Laura told me that almost always, a non-Chinese person needs to have someone introduce them to a grocery store owner, only then will the store owner open up and feel comfortable talking. According to Laura, grocery store owners are primarily in Argentina for business reasons and do not have a particular interest in engaging with people outside of the Fujian community they came from.

This seemed to echo what I gathered from the academic articles I read in Mandarin about Fujianese migration, which tended to focus on the business side of the immigrant experience rather

than the personal (Chen 2007, Li 2007, Tang 2011, Tang 2012). However, as I discuss in Chapter 1, it is not by chance that Fujianese immigrants might not want to converse, given their strong inner circle and a fear of being targeted for hate crimes. I mentioned that when I was in the Barrio Chino the day before, despite the general difficulty of beginning conversations with store owners as a white stranger, I talked with a woman in Chinese who sold bamboo. I shared that this woman and I chatted about her experience living in Buenos Aires for about twenty minutes, and Laura seemed surprised. Beforehand when she had shown me the Chinese characters, maybe she thought I was just interested in how they looked but was unable to converse in Chinese. She paused, looked into my eyes and switched to Chinese, 你会讲中文? (You can speak Chinese?) And from there the conversation completely opened up, as though a whole different world had been waiting to be revealed as soon as we switched to her mother tongue.

### **Part 3: Conversing in Mandarin**

Instead of staying on one topic and following a linear progression, after the switch to Chinese, Laura's stories went from topic to topic. Additionally, her body language became more open and friendly. She smiled more, she relaxed in her seat, and she incorporated an expressive Argentine hand gesture while she spoke in Mandarin. When Argentines speak in an impassioned way, they often make the hand gesture that Laura used – an upturned palm, fingers and thumb together, moving the hand up and down to emphatically make a point. A feeling of hominess and intimacy entered the conversation, and when Laura spoke as well as when I spoke to her in her native language our interaction became more comfortable and colloquial. As we chatted in Chinese, the topics of conversation shifted back and forth from references to Argentina to ones more China-related. The topics of conversation also became incredibly varied, and at times seemingly disconnected.

### Sickness and Health in Buenos Aires' Cultural Melting Pot

Laura described Buenos Aires as a city becoming a cultural melting pot, and in our discussion of the perception of immigrant communities in Buenos Aires, we turned our conversation toward the prevalence of Argentine nationalism and xenophobia. Midway through our Chinese conversation, Laura and I found ourselves talking about how many immigrants around the world now face increasing xenophobia in the countries they move to. Laura shared her thoughts on this: a lot of the time immigrants are seen as a threat when in fact they just come from a different culture, and it is easier to point fingers toward someone different from you and say that their difference is the source of any current problems than it is to reflect on all of the other potential causes of a problem. Laura used multiple Chinese phrases to describe her understanding of increasing conflict between cultures which manifests through xenophobia. She said that today in Buenos Aires there are not only Chinese immigrants, but there are people like 塔利班 *talibān*. She used this word to refer to Muslims wearing Niqabs. When I asked for clarification, she described an outfit of cloth around the woman's whole body, only leaving the eyes uncovered. Although Laura's word choice caught me off guard, it seemed to me like her intention was to talk about how Muslims also face xenophobia around Buenos Aires and are often viewed as part of the Taliban when most are just trying to practice their faith and live in accordance with their cultural values. As we talked about the change over time of immigrants being seen as more of a threat, Laura made an analogy. Paraphrased, she said: 世界上都有健康时候，也有病态时候 (In the world there are always healthy times and morbid times).

At first, I did not understand the connection between health/morbidity and xenophobia, but after further clarification the connection made more sense. Laura meant that there will always be good times and bad times, healthy times and morbid times, human beings just live amongst them as they happen. Laura thought that when immigrants arrive at a country not used to having people of

those different backgrounds, xenophobia within that country will increase. Where there is divisive racism, xenophobia and nationalism, the world is in a period of sickness or morbidity.

### Laura's process of growing up amidst incomprehensible violence

When Laura said that the world has healthy times and morbid times, it occurred to me that at the very time Laura immigrated to Argentina in 1981, Argentina was in the midst of a violent dictatorship. The dictatorship in Argentina began in 1976, with a military coup, although there was state violence prior to 1976 as well. The dictatorship lasted until 1983, and there were an estimated 30,000 people disappeared (Taylor 1997, 158). I asked Laura what it was like to move to Argentina in the middle of a dictatorship. I wondered if the moment she came to the country impacted her own experience there. Did she understand what was going on? Did she feel unsafe? Did this impact her adjustment to living in a new place and settle into a new home? Did the dictatorship in Argentina have any impact on her life at all? She said that when she moved here at seven years old, she could not speak, read, or understand Spanish at all, so none of the news about anything going on within Argentina particularly affected her. She was not aware of what was happening as it happened, and only learned about the political violence in Argentina after she understood more Spanish. By that time the dictatorship was no longer occurring. Laura told me that she started to be more aware of Argentina's political climate during the time of the Malvinas war a year later, in the late spring and early summer of 1982.

As Laura elaborated on her view of the Malvinas war, her words related back to her professional life as a health worker and personal life with her family. Laura said that from her perspective, the war was very sad and hard. She said that the Argentine military sent many untrained or poorly-trained young soldiers to the Malvinas Islands (or Falkland Islands), where they were not set up well to win. After coming back to mainland Argentina, many of the young soldiers could not

find work with good pay, nor were they always mentally healthy. When she mentioned that many committed suicide, I wondered if noticing other people's struggles with mental health as a young child at all impacted her decision to become a psychiatrist. Perhaps other aspects of life moved her to work with people with mental illness, and she retrospectively noted mental health struggles among soldiers after becoming a mental health professional later in life. I would be curious to hear more about what led Laura to become a health worker and if people's processing of traumatic memory of the dictatorship led her to that path, though her profession was not the main focus of this conversation. Then, I asked Laura if she still enjoyed living in Argentina even amidst political instability and violence. For the second time in our conversation she reiterated, "my home is where my close family is." For her, then, her home is Argentina.

### Vaccines and Instability

Even though Laura feels that Argentina is currently her home, her words continued to suggest an ongoing connection with China. Laura referenced Chinese news, as well as global trends, and began to express her Chinese-ness from a political and economic lens as well as a personal and professional one. She talked about how terrible the economy in Argentina has been, and then used Chinese to make an analogy between Argentina's economy and medicine. "像一个疫苗一样" (It's the same as an yìmiáo.) I did not understand the word yìmiáo. "Vacuna," she said in Spanish, "像一个 *vacuna* 一样" (It's like a vaccine.) I understood the words, but I still did not understand the idea. How could the economy be like a vaccine?

Laura laughed and explained. She said that the first time someone gets sick, they are not healthy. Similarly, the first time there was great economic instability in Argentina, she felt shocked. However, in medicine after someone gets a disease the first time it does not make them as sick the second time around, or the third or fourth and so on. When someone gets vaccinated, they are not

only preventing themselves from getting sick at all, but they can get boosters regularly to ensure they remain protected even as the strain of disease shifts over time. A person might feel a little sick after getting vaccinated but following that initial reaction they are protected from the worse illness. Laura said that after 2001 when the economy collapsed in Argentina, she got vaccine after vaccine. The economic and political instability did not surprise her anymore or throw her off guard because she was used to it happening frequently. This comparison combined her medical background and the tendency in Chinese language to express ideas through poetic metaphors. Her medical background coupled with her Chinese background created a unique phrase applicable to Argentina's notoriously unstable economy. Laura's effortless switch between Spanish and Chinese to explain a word I did not understand further affirmed her familiarity with being bi-lingual and bi-cultural.

#### Politically Incorrect Comic Relief

When Laura talked about foreign policy her focus was on China's impact around the globe, not as much about Argentina. She spoke about China's relations with the US and its influence in Africa. Her interest predominantly in Chinese affairs suggested to me that she saw China as a more influential country. This is not to say that she ignores Argentine politics, as I sat with her a day after our interview at a talk on Sino-Argentine relations, but rather than her main focus is on China. Laura seemed to be interested in large global players and felt that Argentina was not one of them. Our conversation continued to go from topic to topic: the US-China trade war, US-North Korea relations, and then we eventually made our way back to talking about the relationship between the US, Argentina and China. Laura said she likes to stay updated on Chinese news, and at the time of our conversation in 2018, she was especially focused on the trade war. She told me that she usually stays updated on the US economy and US/China relations, because they always impact the economy in Argentina. Laura made a comment about how Argentina always has less income than expenditure

and needs to rely on other countries to help it. China, on the other hand, holds the opposite global role. China trades with many other countries, even more so in the last decade.

We talked about how China is increasingly taking action in countries in both Africa and Latin America. She told a joke as we spoke that seemed to suggest her thinking about China, Argentina, and the continent of Africa in a somewhat hierarchical way regarding importance. Of the three regions, China is at top – assisting with development in other countries, then Argentina comes next, with an unstable economy and a reliance on China for assistance to develop. Finally, there is “Africa,” which according to Laura’s joke seemed economically unreliable, and like a bad Chinese investment. Laura noticed the financial support that China gave to developing countries, and the way she spoke suggested that she politically and economically supported China’s actions abroad. While she never explicitly articulated any kind of hierarchy in our conversation, the contents of her joke suggested that she did not trust African nations to follow through on their trade deals. Laura also views Argentina as an economically unstable region, and I wondered if her political support of China has led to her identifying as more Chinese than Argentine.

Laura explained that the Chinese tech company *Huawei* moved into Africa and began to sell things on loan in various countries there. However, one country in Africa soon realized it did not have enough money to pay the loan back, so in place of money they sent a lot of sesame seeds to *Huawei* as a form of payment. Afterwards, apparently China produced many 月饼 (mooncakes) with the sesame seeds and ate them all during the half moon festival. It was an interesting story and joke. Laura said that afterwards, China learned that they should be more careful about loaning money to Africa because African countries won’t always be able to pay back the loan properly.

After hearing this story, I wondered whether “Africa” was used as a stand-in for any country, like Argentina, which could not pay back a loan. Besides pointing to one way in which macro-level international relations can impact an individual’s world view, Laura’s joke shows that



she is sympathetic to China as a powerful nation. Additionally, Laura's humor, which was not intended to homogenize anyone, pointed to complex race issues within Argentina and China, and at the same time it shared an aspect of Chinese culture, food, and festivals that many people outside of China do not know about. Laura shared this story toward the end of our conversation, and soon after we began to wrap our conversation up. We realized that we would both be going to the same presentation on China-Argentina Relations the next day at the *Casa Cultural China*, so we ended our conversation with a giddy 明天见！ (see you tomorrow!) and the typical Argentine salutation of a kiss on the cheek. Since we had switched to Chinese, what I thought would be difficult to drag to an hour-long, rich conversation had turned into a lively, rapid back and forth that spanned many topics. Beyond simply being an entertaining and engaging conversation, though, each topic Laura brought up related in some way back to her own sense of identity as a Chinese woman in Argentina.

#### **Part 4: Unpacking a bi-lingual interview with a "Perpetual Foreigner"**

Throughout our conversation, there were two distinct styles of expression, and these were distinguished along linguistic lines. The first, in Spanish, was more chronological, formal, and linear. Partway through the interview, though, we switched to speaking in Chinese and the conversation style became more open and unguarded. Code-switching, a “temporary appropriation of mainstream language by members of minority groups” (Lacy 2007, 91), takes place when a speaker moves between languages, and in Laura's case, this also included a transition back into her native language.

Importantly, language is never *just* language. After all, culture is carried by language, caught up in language, and speaking a native language allows people to express emotions that they might not experience the same way in a different language. Code-switching results from the process of adapting to culture, but just because someone speaks a language does not mean they have completely adopted the culture in which it is spoken (Velasquez 2010, 56.) Although Laura is fluent

in Spanish, it seemed like her language of intimacy was Mandarin. When we began to speak with one another in Mandarin, Laura may have felt like there was more of a comfortable closeness between us, allowing our conversation to take off. Laura's Chinese culture could be a reason she opened up more when speaking that language. However, people who speak two languages are not bound to only using those languages separately. When one language is distinct from another, one can appropriate part of that culture to gain some sort of advantage. That advantage could simply be that one becomes more assimilated into the majority culture in the place they immigrated to. They can also incorporate aspects of both languages into a hybrid form of expression, what Kasinitz (1997, 1033) calls a "hybrid language," which incorporates parts of multiple languages and cultures to create a new one, and with that new form of expression a new sense of identity. At first, one forms hybrid expressions as a part of integrating into a culture, but eventually those hybrid expressions become a form of one's own cultural identity. Laura's use of the typically Argentine hand gesture showed a hybridization of language that incorporated part of Argentine cultural expression into her own. Zhou and Lee (2007, 199) talk about an *emergent culture of hybridity*, arguing that the absence of historical rules which govern racial categorizations allow for flexibility in identity. They add that this flexibility is a result of an "in-between" or "dual" status as an immigrant, which is the combination of various aspects of multiethnic cultures (2007, 199). In addition to the hybrid hand gesture, Laura's combined-use of Spanish and Chinese in sentences like "It's like a vaccine" point to a combination of Spanish and Chinese in a hybridization of language, expression, and culture.

Laura's expression was indicative of a culture of hybridity, but her hybrid identity formation was a conflictive process. Even though Laura is mostly comfortable in Argentina, she must grapple with a complicated sense of belonging in a nation where she often feels like a foreigner. But this is not an experience that is Laura's alone; rather it is common about people of Asian descent all over the Americas. In fact, scholars use the phrase "perpetual foreigner" to describe this Asian-American

experience. One scholar, Yen Le Espiritu (2008, 100), describes the notion of perpetual foreignness as a form of cultural discrimination that brands Asians as unassimilable, outlandish, and “Oriental.” Citing Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, Yen Le Espiritu reminds us that Asian Americans are often characterized as “permanent house-guests in the house of America” (Espiritu 2008, 100). While both of these definitions were originally applied to Asian people within the United States, the feeling of being perpetually foreign, unassimilable, and “other” was clearly expressed by Laura as well. After all, she talked about her classmates treating her differently than they treated non-Chinese peers when she was little. Even today, when she walks around Buenos Aires she can tell that people see her physical characteristics as markers of her foreignness and assume that she does not belong. Laura’s increased ease and openness when speaking Chinese can help us understand how she still feels connected to China even while making a home for herself in Argentina.

No doubt Laura’s sense of belonging, or lack thereof, is linked to her connection to China. In fact, she may be adequately fit within the bounds of the term “1.5 generation.” The term “1.5 generation” refers to immigrants in the US who came as children (Portes 2011, 228). Typically, “1.5 generation” describes those who came between the ages of 6-12 and must grapple with a dual-identity and sense of belonging in both or sometimes neither location. Although this term is traditionally used in the United States, it is applicable to transnational migrants to Argentina as well, especially to Laura who came to Argentina at 7 years old and now has a complicated hybrid identity. Laura has now spent the majority of her life in Argentina, but still feels that the oft-used phrase *luò yè guī gēn* applies to her experience. She will want to return to China in old age even though Argentina is her home – the place where her parents and loved ones reside. Laura’s parents also plan to return to their roots in China when they are older. Perhaps Laura, her family, and many more Chinese immigrants want this in part because they feel that no matter how adjusted they become to the new country they live in, they will always be treated foreign.

The desire to return to China, where Chinese migrants might feel less foreign, is conveyed in the phrase *luò yè guī gēn*, which is often used to describe a continued connectedness to China even after moving to a new country, but this continued connectedness does not mean that upon returning to China either in old age or for short visits they feel like they completely belong there either. According to Laura, when her mom visited China after many years in Buenos Aires, the China she saw was entirely different than the China she left. It seemed to me like China had transformed into something near unrecognizable to Laura's mom, a place where her roots could no longer thrive. This made me wonder: where does the falling leaf go if the roots have moved?

At first, it seemed to me that if the leaves fall where the roots are, but the tree moves, then the roots go with it. In other words, if a person moves and feels more connected to the country they moved to, they will take root in this new place. However, when someone uses the phrase *luò yè guī gēn*, the roots do not move. No matter where the tree or person moves, the roots are always in China. No matter how different China is, and no matter how adjusted an overseas Chinese person becomes to their new grounds, they will want to return China when they grow old. However, not every person wants the same thing, and it is incorrect to assume that just because some, or many, Chinese immigrants abroad want to return to China in their old age that all do. Even in Laura's life it is unwise to assume, as the place she called home in the interview was not the place she said she would like to be when she grows old. "My home is where my close family is" she said, in reference to Argentina. Does another Chinese phrase express this feeling?

Although Laura did not use this phrase when we spoke, there is another idiom which captures the feelings of some migrants who feel strongly connected to the country they move to: 落地生根 *luò dì shēng gēn* (the roots grow where you land). This phrase is used to describe what I initially misunderstood *luò yè guī gēn* to describe. The roots go with the moving tree and plant in the new soil it arrives at. *Luò dì shēng gēn* references a process of "planting roots permanently as a racial

minority in the adopted countries” (Sidharta 1993, 27). While Laura did not use this phrase to express her own identity, it is possible that as second generation (or 2.5 generation) immigrants her children would identify more with this phrase than *luò yè guī gēn*.

In fact, scholar Osaremi Parham discusses a generational difference in identity formation when addressing what it means to be an *Argenchino*, a Chinese Argentine with two distinct ethnicities and cultures. Combining the words *Argentino* and *Chino* (Argentine/Argentinian and Chinese), she describes an *Argenchino* as someone who “integrates Chinese culture into their way of life while simultaneously identifying as an Argentine” (Parham 2014, 12). Laura’s children might identify as *Argenchinos*, and in some ways Laura herself reflects the qualities of someone with dual Chinese and Argentine identities. Often, older immigrants identify as *Huaqiao* (overseas Chinese) rather than *Argenchino*. These immigrants may also tend identify with the phrase *luò yè guī gēn*, planning to one day return home instead of *luò dì shēng gēn*, planning to grow new roots. *Argenchinos* often express a greater sense of affinity to Argentina, feeling as though they have grown new roots and found home there (Ibid.).

In light of the term *luò dì shēng gēn*, my understanding that roots can move was not entirely wrong, at least as far as immigrant experiences go. In this case, however, I was inaccurately using it to describe Laura’s identity. Because so many people who identify as *Argenchino* are young, there are still many aspects of that identity that remain uncertain. The sense of belonging and not belonging in Argentina as a Chinese migrant evolves generationally; perhaps a continued study could delve into the *Argenchino* identity among young Chinese people living in Argentina. Some people feel more Chinese and others feel more Argentine, while some people do not know how to self-identify. I would be curious to hear how Laura’s children identify after they grow older, and whether they feel like they have grown new roots, or if their leaves will fall back to China. How can language reflect evolving identities? How are hybrid expressions and cultures created among Chinese immigrants to

Argentina? Intertwined with notions of hybrid culture, perpetual foreignness, and differing ideas of where home exists, Laura's story gives a glimpse into how language and identity interact to inform a sense of belonging as a Chinese immigrant to Argentina.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> See Trejos, “Young Taiwanese Immigration to Argentina: The Challenges of Adaptation, Self Identity and Returning” for more about Taiwanese immigration.



## Chapter 3 : Whose Feminist Journey?

### 第三章：寻找真我的女权主义旅程

《蓝莲花》<sup>1</sup>

*Lán liánhuā*

Blue Lotus

没有什么能够阻挡

*méiyǒu shénme nénggòu zǔdǎng*

Nothing could ever stand

你对自由的向往

*nǐ duì zìyóu de xiàngwǎng*

between you and the free land.

天马行空的生涯

*tiānmǎxíngkōng de shēngyá*

in a life of laissez-aller

你的心了无牵挂

*nǐ de xīn liǎo wú qiānguà*

all worries are blown away.

穿过幽暗的岁月

*chūāngùo yōu'àn de suìyuè*

You toil through the years of dismay,

也曾感到彷徨

*yě céng gǎndào fǎnghuáng*

from time to time lost on the way

当你低头的瞬间

*dāng nǐ dītóu de shùnjiān*

until you glance down at your feet

才发觉脚下的路

*cái fājué jiǎoxià de lù*

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<sup>1</sup> Lyrics and translation adapted from <http://kyfy.xdf.cn/201103/699837.html>

underneath which you discover the road.

心中那自由的世界

*xīnzhōng nà zìyóu de shìjiè*

Your heart is in the free world.

如此的清澈高远

*rúcǐ de qīngchè gāoyuǎn*

Clear and sublime,

盛开着永不凋零

*shèngkāizhe yǒng bù diāolíng*

蓝莲花

*lán liánhuā*

Blooms the blue lotus,

always on its prime.

Eva Blanco sang this song for me as we sat together in a Café in Buenos Aires. Eva said this song lends itself to the most important thing for her: Freedom. “More than perfection, security, wealth...” She said maybe it was just an individual desire, but for her “The home is where the heart feels peace.” Eva’s heart feels peace where it feels free. When Eva is in China, she feels like she needs to go back to Argentina, and when she is in Argentina she feels like she needs to go to China. She goes to China for work and to run her wine exporting business, while also taking advantage of her time there to see her family. But when she is in Argentina she feels more comfortable. After being in there for 8 years, she feels connected to Argentina, noting that “I think that my body should be where it is, but my soul is here.” She said that it is important to end up in a city that you like. When she goes to China she feels like her body is there, but her soul is in Buenos Aires. Eva’s story brings up big questions about identity and belonging, perhaps even urging those who hear it to question whether they are satisfied with their own surroundings. Eva’s story is one about Chinese migration to Argentina. But that is not all it is. It

is also the story of a woman traveling outside of all she knows in search of finding her true home. Much like Mónica's drawing of Chinese characters in chapter 1 reflects a common humanity between all people that transcends language and country of origin, Eva's search for truth, freedom, peace, identity, and belonging is a familiar story that people can understand no matter where they are from.

This section of the thesis will focus on Eva's identity formation as a woman. By doing so, it will give a snippet of what a Chinese woman's experience in Argentina is like and how Eva came to grapple with her identity as a Chinese-Argentine woman. While her experience can illustrate much about a woman's cross-cultural experience, it is important to remember that this is the experience of a woman with money and privilege, and the topics she focuses on are influenced by that. Nevertheless, some of the emotions and sentiments she expresses, as well as the transnational processes of "fitting in" or "adjusting" no doubt resonate with those of other immigrants to Argentina and other places in the Americas and elsewhere. As such, given the openness with which she tells her story in spoken and written words, she allows us a privileged vantage point from which to think about the complexities of belonging within this transnational context.

In order to give us a better means of seeing the many ways in which Eva understood and understands her own experiences as a migrant, I will introduce Eva as a person and then focus on the overlapping themes that arose in both an interview I had with her as well as in her novel, *Ida* (which I refer to in citations simply as "I"). *Ida* was published in Argentina in 2018 under the name Lu Xia. It is a kind of fictionalized memoir detailing the transformative journey of Ida, a woman who moves from China to Buenos Aires. Eva Blanco's (that is, Lu Xia's) story serves to show how no migrant is typical, which was a common thread throughout my research. In

discovering how free she feels having left behind a place in which she felt repressed, Eva uses *Ida* to give us a perspective from which to view how different she feels China is from Argentina. In particular, the book references particular aspects of culture in these three areas of comparison: bodies, sex, and names. Not only that, however, these were also the themes that recurred throughout my conversation with the book's author. Therefore, these three themes will serve to guide the analysis in the present chapter.

But why focus on Eva and her book at all, especially when there are so many other Chinese migrants living in Argentina who have not yet written a book detailing their experiences? An analysis of Eva and her work is an interesting addition to the study of Chinese migration to Argentina, because gender and womanhood is at the core of Eva's identity and story. Before I went to Argentina to study Chinese migration, the papers that I found predominantly focused on analyzing the immigrant experience irrespective of gender. However, through Eva's words I learned that being a woman has profoundly impacted the experience of at least one immigrant, Eva herself. This is just one woman's experience, but it gives us an inside look at the life of an immigrant which would not be clear by looking at demographic information alone. If gender were left out as a point of reference when talking about immigration, the story would be missing what, for some, lies at the core of identity. This thesis helps us think of immigrants not as numbers but as people, and this chapter suggests some reasons why women immigrate to a new place.

### **An Introduction to Eva**

Eva moved to Argentina on January 1, 2001. Since then, although she originally moved to run a business, she went on to become the first Chinese woman to ever write a Spanish-

language novel in Argentina. When she first arrived, she had only studied Spanish for four months. Prior to her arrival, she had lived in Florida for a short amount of time but thought that people in the US were cold and that the US market had less opportunity for starting a new business. She said that there are fresh markets in Latin America and in Africa. Eva is a woman who has grown up with the help of influential people and she carried herself with the air of a high-class woman. She likes wines and asked about Napa Valley. She treated me to dessert and insisted on paying for the whole meal. Eva seems to use her money to make others feel welcome, and it seemed like she had plenty of money to use. She liked Buenos Aires because it felt romantic, farther away from China, and like an adventure. She said that she visited many places before settling on Argentina, and she likes Argentina the most even with all its faults (though I never got a clear picture of what she defined those to be): “When you love a place, you are able to accept those faults.”

According to Eva, it is difficult enough to run a business as a woman, but the difficulties are compounded when doing so in a non-native language and culture. For instance, when she is in China it is much easier to catch the subtleties of what someone is saying to her, but in Argentina it can be a challenge. This sometimes makes it difficult to be able to tell who might be lying to her when she is doing business in Argentina, and thus people who are trying to cheat her or trick her have an advantage. This would not happen in China because Eva would be able to tell when someone is not trustworthy and simply would not work with them. She said it is less about knowing the reputation of a person and more about just being able to get a “sense” of a person when she talks with them, which is hard to do when the cultural understanding informing that “sense” is still forming. Eva’s business expertise was cultivated before she came to Argentina, and when she was still in China she ran a furniture business that sold furniture to

Nigeria. She did not go to Nigeria herself, but her clients were from there. In fact, she studied under the guidance of the Nigerian ambassador to China.

### **Public Perception of Eva**

Eva is publicly portrayed in Argentina as an elegant businesswoman with a superior ability to artistically express her experiences. I knew who Eva was prior to meeting her, or at least I knew about her beforehand. I saw her picture in an advertisement in *Dang Dai*, a Chinese-Argentine exchange magazine, for her book *Ida*. On YouTube, I had already seen several videos of Eva promoting her book and reading segments of it in front of large applauding audiences. A few days later I was going to interview her, and I was doing my best to finish her book before we met. Multiple people had told me about what a remarkable woman she is – definitely not the ordinary person. And I was not disappointed.

She agreed to meet me at a café. I got there five minutes early and noticed that there were ants all over the table. I tried to squish some with my napkin, but they kept coming back. Most of them were gone when, after a few minutes, I saw Eva walk inside. She caught my eye and I said hello, and she gave me a typically Argentine kiss-on-the cheek greeting. She sat down, and our conversation began. I asked Eva how she was doing, and we started with pleasantries in Spanish. I introduced myself to her and explained why I was in Argentina. As I spoke I found myself suddenly becoming tongue-tied, but Eva eased my nerves and said I was welcome to take notes while we talked and even to record our conversation.

An hour and a half later, I left the interview star-struck, completely enthralled by a woman who lives her life with so much excellence. Eva was intelligent, kind, confident and at ease throughout the entire interview. She sang her favorite song in the middle of the café; not so

loudly that everyone could hear, but without a hint of self-consciousness. She talked about sex unabashedly in front of the people around us. She suggested we share a chocolate cake for dessert, and then insisted that she pay for the entire lunch. She apologetically excused herself during our chat to deal with a business matter – she lived right next door to the café we were at and a potential client had brought two bottles of wine to her home so that she could decide whether to export or not. Eva’s job was to drink red wine, and her life seemed luxurious and calm. I was dazzled by her accomplishments and her class: not only did she run her own exporting business and write a book, but she did so while collecting expensive wines, sipping tea, and eating chocolate cake.

Yet my excitement was impeded shortly after when I was given a more critical view of Eva and her work. I talked to other people who knew Eva soon after and they offered another perspective. When I shared how much Eva blew me away, I was met with a critique of Eva’s work. They said something along the lines of, “There is no doubt that she *is* incredible, but I’m not sure I agree with her definition of feminism.” They continued to remark that the way Eva talks about women’s liberation seems overly simplistic to them, as though women in China struggle with equality but in Argentina women are completely liberated. They asked: If women in Argentina are free, why are there still policies restricting women’s rights to their bodies? Why is there still a rampant *machista* culture here? I had no answers to these questions, but they made me take a second look at my interview with Eva.

They also had some insight regarding the publication of *Ida*. They suggested that Eva’s political aspirations impacted the pace of the writing and publication of *Ida*. As they explained it, Eva appears to have rushed the publication of her book, as though she had been on some sort of self-imposed timeline. Eva and her editor had a falling-out, but Eva continued pushing the book



through for publication even though it would have benefited from a deeper edit, as evidenced by the presence of misspelled words included toward the end of the book. Rather than pushing the publishing date beyond 2018 in order for it to be completely edited, Eva prioritized releasing the book as it was so that she could begin another one shortly thereafter. She published the book in 2018 as planned and is already working on her second book. Although I had not thought about Eva being on any sort of timeline, when the idea was brought up to me after the interview was over it made a lot of sense. Indeed, soon after the interview I learned that Eva has met with many influential people in the past, won several awards, and is making a name for herself in both the business and political realms. If Eva does indeed have political aspirations, publishing a book (or multiple books) about Chinese-Argentine cross-cultural connection does a phenomenal job of bridging a cultural gap between her and any would-be voters. And this is exactly what Eva's book *Ida* does, as it tells the story of a Chinese woman *Chun Hua* (later known as *Ida*), who comes to Argentina yearning to start a new life far away from where she was raised.

### **Bridging the cultural gap: Forming a connection with Eva**

Eva and I got along well during the interview and were both able to share our experiences of adjusting to a new culture by having a back and forth dialogue. The many adjustments that Eva went through reminded me of my own life experiences, and once again I felt as though I could relate to a part of Eva's story. Eva told her stories in a lighthearted and open way, making it easy to share my own experiences in the interview. I told her about how I had mistakenly planned two meetings earlier in the week – the first one with an Argentine professor and the second with a Chinese doctor. I told her I realized my mistake after an hour of waiting for the

Argentine woman, and Eva knowingly laughed and said, “ah yes, you have to meet with the Chinese first.”<sup>1</sup>

Our conversation thus quickly shifted to cultural differences in punctuality. I told her about how I had been texting my mom all morning worried about what to do. My mom, who grew up in Puerto Rico and is notoriously late to everything, responded by teasing me that now I know how far she has come since living in Puerto Rico. Eva thought this was funny and said that in Argentina, like in Puerto Rico, things start when the people get there. “We don’t have a fixed schedule here. Something starts at 6:30? Yeah! More or less...” In Argentina it is fine when people are late to things, it is no big deal, but she has to watch herself when she goes back to China. I told Eva that when I was in first grade the principal told my mom that I was smart but if I kept showing up late to school I would be forced to stay in the first grade for another year. My mom indignantly responded that I was only missing the pledge of allegiance, which she thought was not worth showing up for anyways. Eva said that, like my mom, she has now gotten used to showing up late to everything, and when she returns to China she has to be careful. She tries to show up on time to things, but if she shows up 15 minutes late, which would be okay in Argentina, it really bothers Chinese people who are on time to everything. So, she self-adjusts when she goes back.

Eva is always comparing the two cultures, and the interaction between the two is constantly on her mind. Indeed, the difficult process of adjusting to living in Argentina was reflected in various stories describing culture shock that Eva shared during the interview, especially related to dates and time. I asked Eva to elaborate a bit more about how she adjusted to being in Argentina. She said it was difficult to adapt to the Argentine way of working. In China people are very punctual, faster paced, and serious when they work, and in Argentina

people are more relaxed and less timely. She said when she first got here people would tell her, “I’ll call you tomorrow,” and she would be waiting the entire morning. It was difficult to adjust to this cultural difference, particularly this different pace of life and of work. If there is a date of any kind and then it starts raining – it automatically means that the date will not happen. That is very different than Eva was used to, if it were raining in China people would just go in the rain. The different conceptualizations of time between Argentina and China are also reflected in social planning surrounding food.

In both Argentina and China, food has a significant role in socializing with others, but the way people engage with one another through food-based gatherings shows yet another cultural difference between the two countries. In Argentina, a common practice called an *asado* involves friends gathering to eat barbeque together. According to Eva’s description, everyone shows up an hour late, the food is on the grill and everyone is relaxed and spending time together as the food is prepared and people arrive. In China, on the other hand, when someone is invited over for dinner then it is customary for the food ready by the time they get there, if not then everyone just sits around alone and bored while it cooks. According to Eva, if someone were to get to dinner an hour late, all of the food would be cold, and it would be very disrespectful. Eva affirmed, “You need to show up on time, it is very logical.” I asked Eva if she ever felt a sense of disrespect when people showed up late to things in Argentina. She said it made her very frustrated at first, but then she began to understand that there are a lot of things that happen structurally in the country which impact people’s timeliness. There are often strikes or protests going on, and people simply cannot get places on time. She said she usually has people over to her house instead of the other way around, because if she were to go over to someone’s house then she would be waiting for hours for food and would get really hungry.

I found common ground once again with Eva on the matter of understanding nuance in colloquialisms of a non-native language. She said there are still words that she knows she cannot translate literally in order to keep the meaning true from one language to another, and that sometimes she still struggles to understand the essence of what a word means. One cannot translate literally, she insisted. Rather, she has to find the context of a word or of literature in order to translate the idea because translating the words does not work. At first, she said she didn't have any particular words in mind, but then she said that words like “seguro, claro, por supuesto” (which roughly all mean “sure” or “of course”) all have a bit of a difference and it is difficult to distinguish which one to use. In Chinese it is much easier for her to understand the slight differences in language and meaning in words.

I readily agreed. I told Eva that when I first got to China to study I was very confused why people always said “man man lai” (慢慢来), which translates literally to “come slowly.” I would be leaving stores and storeowners would tell me to “come slowly” and I would think, “but I'm leaving, why does it matter whether I leave slowly or quickly, either way I'll be gone!” and Eva laughed. Eva said it was more like a “take it easy” and I told her people's remarks made much more sense to me once I figured that out. I told her that some phrases in Spanish confuse me too, like “por las dudas” which translates literally to “for the doubts” but means more like “just in case,” but is also sometimes said at the grocery store when people are trying to ask if you “happen to” have one or two pesos to make giving change easier. Eva joked that a confusing word for her is “capaz” when used to mean “maybe.” In Argentina, it might mean “probably not” but she is used to “maybe” being used to mean “probably yes.” These nuances in language made her confused at first, but when she shared her mastery of them now she spoke with a sense of accomplishment and pride. By talking with each other about the struggles of fitting into various

cultures within our own lives, Eva and I built a friendly and open rapport during the interview. Our go-between created an environment where we could both talk openly, and it set the groundwork for getting to know Eva better as our conversation progressed.

### **A glimpse into Eva's feminism**

As we got to know each other, one of the bridges we crossed was feminism. Throughout the interview, Eva expressed her belief that women themselves are not always the biggest proponents of women's rights. Eva said, I think my mom could be more *machista* than my dad. At the time of the interview, Eva was starting her second novel. In the novel, the main character (a woman) wins a big prize. But the mom says, "pero te falta un pene." (but you don't have a penis.) In other words, the mom is suggesting that if the protagonist were a man, then pursuing what she wants to study and winning a prize would make sense, but she's not a man so why is she doing this? The mother seems to think that a woman making a name for herself is a waste of time, but the level of independence it would bring is exactly what Eva craves.

This woman's search for independence and agency related to Eva's own desires for coming to Argentina. Eva explained that when a woman has access to work, she is able to have the knowledge and ability to make decisions for herself and choose what she wants in her life. Indeed, this was largely Eva's experience. The author came to Argentina to pursue a wine exportation business, but she also chose to come to Argentina because it is far from China and she enjoys the romance of Buenos Aires. "China es como mi madre y Argentina como pareja. No puedo elegir a mi madre, pero puedo elegir a mi pareja." (China is like my mother and Argentina like a partner. I cannot choose my mother, but I can choose my partner.) Eva elaborated: China is her "origen" and Argentina is her "destino," which means both destination and destiny

depending on context. And here it mostly meant destination but certainly had a twinge of both – Eva spoke in a romantic and dreamy sort of way, after all.

Eva had developed a feminist critique of China founded in the literature of other Chinese writers like Zhang Ailing and Yan Geling in the US, and Liu Tianyi in Australia, all of whom are well-known Chinese women who write about love and society as it relates to sexuality. Eva valued these authors because of their fearlessness in writing about topics which might get them in trouble in China. Eva mentioned that Liu Tianyi was punished for writing a novel deemed “pornographic” for its portrayal of a Gay romance. Indeed, when I looked up Ms. Liu following the interview, I discovered that in 2018 she was sentenced to ten years in prison on the charges of “producing and selling pornography<sup>2</sup>.” Although I do not believe Eva was implying she had any kind of plan to write a similarly controversial book, I did take her admiration of Liu Tianyi as a clear disapproval of the way China responds to Chinese authors who push to expand which notions of sexuality may be considered acceptable in China. When asked about her thoughts regarding the exchange of cultures, and how that exchange can help the creation of new creative work, Eva’s response circled back to feminism, but a version of feminism that seemed to oversimplify the description of women in Argentina as “liberated.”

Eva talked again and again about how in China there is still an idea that women are “debil” (weak), but that is not the same in Argentina. Eva seemed to think that women in Argentina are more gregariously curious, in her words saying “[Argentine] women are more active investigators and have more charisma.” Eva continued to share her opinions on how that type of female expression is different from many Chinese women who often say, “ay no me puedo. Yo no se cómo hacer.” (Ay, I can’t. I don’t know how to do it.) Eva added that in Argentina women do things for themselves and it is more acceptable to be self-sufficient.

Women in Argentina can have their own careers, get high education, and pursue what they want. However, Eva remarked that in China, few men can accept if a woman has a higher level of education or makes more money than he does. To Eva, this doesn't seem to happen as much in Argentina.

Eva feels she can do what she wants in Argentina: run her business and write her books. In China, people ask her “what are you doing writing a novel? What’s the point of doing that? You should get married and have children.” That life does not appeal to Eva, and she seems to enjoy that in Argentina her ideal lifestyle is acceptable. We started talking again about everything that people could learn from the exchange of culture. Eva said that she loves learning about different cultures because it allows her to understand more about the world and grow from a place of “desconocimiento de todo” (not knowing anything), so that she can learn something new about the world. It seems as though Eva has already learned a lot after only 8 years in Argentina. By writing from a “desconocimiento de todo” Eva was able to portray two distinct cultures in a way that was accessible to people who knew nothing about one or the other (or either). However, what emerged as the most interesting part of *Ida* lay not in the cultural gap she aimed to bridge by publishing the novel in Spanish, but in *how* she chose to tell her story knowing that a predominantly Argentine audience would be reading it. Eva wrote a novel expressing that after moving to Argentina, she became a liberated woman. However, through an analysis of *Ida* and the themes within, the audience is left with a more nuanced story than Eva herself may have even intended to include.

### **A Bit of Background about *Ida*, a Fictionalized Memoire**

According to Eva, *Ida* provides an interesting lens for an audience lacking familiarity with Chinese culture to learn about it, but for Chinese people the novel includes so many details about typical Chinese life that it renders the narrative overly familiar and uninteresting. While for some Chinese readers this might be the case, Eva's assumption did not account for Chinese readers who might find the novel especially interesting because of the ideas within it that they find thought provoking or controversial. For an Argentine audience, *Ida* bridges a gap between cultures to forge a sense of unified humanity between people from different backgrounds, but it would likely elicit a different response in a Chinese audience. At present, the only locatable edition of the novel is in Spanish (though Eva assured me that she wrote the novel in both Spanish and Chinese). Because of the language barrier, it is difficult to gauge the response to the book itself from a non-Spanish speaking Chinese audience.

Eva told me the novel was not about her own life, but there were several moments in the storyline which exactly paralleled personal life-experiences she shared with me during our conversation. The different moments in *Ida* might not all come directly from Eva's life, but during my interview with her she openly discussed many experiences and opinions which were also in the novel. The novel strikes me as a fictionalized memoir, putting into a fictionalized form much of Eva's life, even if some of the specifics are altered. As such, I will use the novel to think through what Eva said to me, and some of the ways in which her experiences and thoughts (and her fictionalizing of them) give us a better understanding of a Chinese immigrant's story, as well as how that story can be told. Many of the similarities I noticed between Eva and the protagonist Ida related to their experiences of escaping a society where their bodies and sexualities were oppressed, and to their experiences of finding liberation as women after moving to Argentina.



Eva softened her remarks on women's abilities to make decisions by pointing out that each woman likes to conduct herself differently. Some want to get married and have kids, but her tone and phrasing seemed to suggest to me that this was not entirely what Eva wanted in her own life. Sometimes women will want to confidently pursue an education, thought Eva out loud. The tendency of the world is changing, and it is no good to walk backwards, this is why Eva said at the beginning of her book, "ser feminista es el camino de Ida, no hay retorno" (being a feminist is Ida's journey, there is no return.) But what does Ida's feminism look like, and whose feminist journey are we taking? Is it the journey of Ida, Eva, Chun Hua or Lu Xia? Is it a version of feminism that other Chinese women, Argentine women and women from elsewhere around the world agree with? A thematic analysis of Eva's book and interview can help us figure that out.

When focusing on Eva's story it is important to emphasize the parts of her life she expressed as most important to her. And make no mistake, my portrayal here of Eva's story as written must reflect her own truth, even if I question it along the way. Eva compared Chinese and Argentine women's expressiveness, paraphrased she said:

Women [in Argentina] can be more natural, speak more directly and freely, and I think there is a lot of development and change still. For example, every generation it changes a bit. My great grandmother had bound feet, but my grandma didn't need to do that. My grandmother never went to school, but my mom did. Because of the cultural revolution, my mom couldn't finish school beyond the first grade. And now it is acceptable for a woman to get more education. But with this growing there is still pushback from society.

Eva gave another concrete example: Unlike her mother, she was able to finish school. However, throughout her education Eva was always told that women were worse at math than men, women were less intelligent than men, and a woman's biggest goal should be to get married and have a child. She noted that women are now some of the smartest students in the math class, but when she was in school women did not always feel like they could be. This section of our conversation brought me to thinking about how Eva's book also discusses women's liberation. I will focus on

three ideas in the book that, while controversial to those who disagree with such a strong stance on women's subjugation within China, provide insight into Eva's own experience: bodies, sex and names.

### **Theme 1: Bodies**

The history of the standard of beauty and freedom of women in China has evolved over the past century, and in *Ida* Eva compares beauty norms and cultures with those in Argentina. This segment from *Ida* echoes many of Eva's own thoughts and experiences, right down to her love for playing tennis.

At the Recoleta fair, many girls sunbathe in bikini. How weird! She had been told that the beauty standard was not having white skin, like in China. Chinese women come out with umbrellas, not because of the rain but to protect themselves from the ultraviolet rays that come from the sun. But here women, of different ages, are under the sun in a plaza, a villa, by the river or playing tennis.

Chun Hua likes tennis. Actually, she played very well when she was in college, but she did not have many partners because Chinese women do not want to have strong muscles. Or maybe they do not want men to think they are stronger. Or to be in the sun and get darker.<sup>3</sup> (I, 82)

Just like Ida, Eva played tennis when she was younger. Eva said that she felt like there was no opportunity to play with people in China, but when she got to Argentina she was able to enjoy the sport again. Eva described how different beauty standards and gender norms are in China and in Argentina and described the latter as a place where women are more able to do things like men. In Eva's (paraphrased) words: "In Argentina, women are more aggressive – use bad words, share their opinions, are not afraid to be strong. They have more power. In China, it's not the same. In China, it's best to be *blanca y debil* (white and weak)." In fact, Eva said she started playing tennis often only after she got to Argentina, for in China it never would have happened because it is not "good" or "beautiful" for women to have arm muscles or tan skin. She explained

that “Men say, ‘I don’t like it.’ But now I am saying, what the fuck does it matter if you like it or not.”<sup>4</sup> Eva’s newfound frustration with Chinese beauty ideals demonstrated a change in her perception of body image since leaving her country of origin, and the resumption of hobbies which she had previously abandoned pointed to Eva’s reclamation of a part of her identity: one needs to be neither *blanca* nor *debil* to be beautiful.

Eva hypothesized about the origins of Chinese beauty standards both during the interview and in her book, her thoughts almost identical in both. Eva thinks that the beauty standard has developed over a thousand years. In the book, when Ida sees the feet of an Argentine woman riding a bike outside she thinks about her grandmother’s bound feet. She wonders if Argentine women would ever know the suffering of Chinese women on the other side of the world who had to bind their feet all because men preferred small feet:

How many millions of victims suffered during that time? She cried when in her childhood she saw the tortured feet of her grandmother. Behind each foot there was a woman suffering. Each incomplete foot fits in a story of tears.

But here is different. She feels a fresh wind that caresses the hair of her forehead. Here women like to have skin the color of bronze. Why do Chinese not like that and Argentines do? Chun Hua reflects on the reasons for these differences. She had read a theory.

In China, in the generation of their parents, rural families received a piece of land and lower-class women had to work it. Thus, strong and dark-skinned women were poor peasants. On the contrary, women from rich families did not have that need, they went to school, or to the office, or they simply dedicated themselves to being housewives.

Meanwhile, on this side of the world, in Argentina and the countries of the West, the land was owned by few. The majority of middle and lower-class women worked in offices or factories. Only those who had more money could have more leisure time and use it to travel, to do sports or to enjoy the beach and the sea.<sup>5</sup> (I, 85)

Eva writes with a romantic notion of how life for women in Argentina works, often portraying Argentine women as free and Chinese women as oppressed. In China women shed tears, in Argentina they feel a fresh breeze. Eva is pushing Argentine women to understand the suffering of Chinese women, but does she oversimplify the freedom of Argentine women in the process?

The sharp contrast between Argentine and Chinese women is one of the ways that Eva expresses her love for Argentina, but is this love slightly misplaced when Argentine women still struggle to attain equal treatment? Possibly, but perhaps Eva's point is that even if women in Argentina still struggle to attain equality, they have not historically suffered to the same extent as Chinese women. Whether one agrees with this stance or not, there is certainly validity in Eva's desire to express her own truth in her story. Later in the novel, Eva writes about how Ida wants to be an Argentine woman, an independent woman who does not need a partner to be complete (I, 187). While this might still be an oversimplification of the level of autonomy that Argentine women have, it points to Eva's experience of finding independence after arriving to Argentina. Moreover, this independence allowed her to feel like she was enough without a partner and led her to feel free to explore her sexuality.

## **Theme 2: Sex**

In the interview, Eva brought our conversation back to feminism and liberated women's expression at every turn in our conversation, often referencing sex. For example, in response to a question about the differences in political expression and protesting between Argentina and China, Eva brought the conversation back to gender and sex. She explained:

In Argentina, the woman is not an object. When the woman wakes up and becomes involved in things, she can get involved politically, talk with friends, read literature from outside the country. For example, when I was at Beijing Labor University (北京劳动大学), I remember that I saw the movie *Sex and the City*. I remember thinking – these women are nuts! How is it possible that Amanda has so many lovers, men and men coming and going? And then I thought, yes – women can do this. Then I got to another stage – Why not? Why can't women do this?

Eva's response suggested two things to me: firstly, the idea of women's liberation and free expression was something Eva was going to come back to repeatedly throughout the interview.

This was one of several times Eva's answer focused on the idea of women's liberation, this time not even prompted by a question on that topic. It is something on Eva's mind constantly that she focuses her life's work on and was something on her mind before she left Beijing for Buenos Aires. Secondly, Eva had developed a sense of indignation against Chinese culture, where in her eyes women live in a society filled with social restrictions.

As she spoke, Eva analyzed her own response to the portrayal of women in *Sex and the City*, noticing the evolution in her thought in three stages. First: how is it possible for a woman to have so many lovers? Second: It is okay for a woman to have many lovers. And third: Why can't women have many lovers? Within the context of our conversation, it seemed like Eva was asking why it is not acceptable for a woman to have as many sexual partners as men. Eva questioned why she, as a woman raised in China, initially thought the women seemed strange for enjoying sex frequently and openly. While sex not being talked about openly is not a problem unique to China, by sharing this story with me Eva emphasized the evolution of her own once-closed-off notions of sex which formed when she was still in China.

Sex appears in *Ida* as well. In the book, the protagonist expresses her joy at living in Argentina through several scenes where she and her Chinese friends gossip about their sexual encounters:

- Terrible! A total tragedy!
- Why? Very small, or very short time?
- Nothing worked! It didn't get hard. He couldn't enter.
- Is it because of nerves?
- We tried three times, it did not work. I should not listen to you all, you advised me to wait until I got to know him well. I know him well already. If it does not work in bed, it is useless.
- How can it be? A tall, strong guy who always goes to the gym.
- In bed, what's the point of being tall? It only takes up more space.
- Hahaha!

- What a pity! He was a good candidate to be a husband. He has a good education, he earns well, he's cute.
- I tell you: if he doesn't work well in bed, the rest is pointless. Do you know that in Beijing thirty percent of divorces now are due to lack of harmony in bed?
- How advanced! Before, women could not even talk about sex.
- But in the rural areas of China it remains that way.
- Sure, sex was and still is taboo.<sup>6</sup> (I, 102)

Ida and her friends chat away about their sex lives, something that they comment would not have been possible in the past in China. When I spoke with two other Chinese women about this scene, one of whom is a student completing a Gender Sexuality and Women's Studies thesis on intimate relationships among Chinese international students in the US (Marianne<sup>7</sup>) and thus has some expertise on the matter, they both thought that nowadays it is quite normal to talk in this way amongst friends in large cities. In rural areas people still do not speak this way. Reflecting on the way sex is talked about in my own country, that is not altogether different from the way women in cities versus the countryside approach sex in the United States. While it is good that the women in the novel feel liberated to talk amongst each other about sex after they are in Argentina, it is important that after reading *Ida* one does not assume that in China no one does the same. That assumption is incorrect and can lead to people concluding that women are unable to express their sexualities at all in China. *Ida* includes a nuanced portrayal of conversations about sex: its dialogue is humorous and liberating to women and shows the differences in the casualness of sex-related conversations between Argentine and Chinese cultures. Although open conversations about sex are not unique to Argentina, according to the Chinese women I spoke with, there are still parts of China where this type of open conversation would not occur. Additionally, Eva left for Argentina in 2011, when sex was not as openly talked about as it is

now. This would somewhat explain her strong belief that women are more liberated upon leaving China, even if today there are women in China who discuss sex openly as well.

In the interview, I asked Eva how the themes of liberty, sexuality, and femininity related to her own story. “You wrote about these themes in your book but are they also a part of your life?” Eva gave a detailed response, which, paraphrased, pointed to her belief that in China women almost don’t talk about things like sex. Men talk about it all of the time, but women never do and there’s no reason why they shouldn’t. If a man can talk about a penis over the dinner table in a public place, then women should be able to as well. She continued to explain:

Women are told that men are better at math, that women will never be as smart. But that isn’t true. It is still socially unacceptable for a woman to earn more than her husband, or to have received more education. Women shouldn’t be older than their husbands either. If any of these things are true, it will be very hard for a woman to marry – but it is also still the ideal that a woman does marry as her end goal. Have a family.

Then Eva started comparing this with women in Argentina. She explained that women in Argentina seem to have more control over their own destiny, and that there are powerful important women in Argentina, too. She feels it is not like that in China, where it is seen that if the woman does not get married then she is doing something wrong with her life.

The opinions of two Chinese women in the US with whom I shared these remarks complicated my understanding of Eva’s perspective on women’s experiences in China. These women expressed that while Chinese women must sometimes follow gendered expectations and norms, the situation for young women today did not seem to them quite as extreme as the picture Eva painted. It is possible that in her own life, Eva did not talk about sex very much before coming to Argentina, but many other women in China today do. Based on the preliminary findings of the research into intimate relationships among Chinese international students, female Chinese international students do sometimes feel more sexually liberated than they did in China,

but the reasons why they feel that way are mixed. Some of the factors included moving away from a high-pressure environment, physically moving out of their parents' homes, and being surrounded by an environment that allows for more free time outside of school. These factors contribute to a coming-of-age process that coincides with their migration to the US, and the change in their perceptions about sexual intimacy cannot be completely attributed to being in a new culture. According to Marianne's research, although many respondents did not learn about sex in school or with their parents, they were able to forge an understanding of sex online on their own in middle school if not earlier. None of her female respondents recalled any negative attitudes towards either sex in committed relationships or casual sexual relationships. This, coupled with the fact that many adult women in China talk about sex casually amongst each other, suggests that sex is no longer as much of a taboo as it used to be.

Perhaps, like the Chinese international students in the US, Eva felt a sort of sexual awakening after arriving and attributed her newfound conversations and sense of freedom to being in a new place. This is Eva's truth, and if she found more freedom after coming to Argentina then she is entitled to express that truth in her book. Eva developed a sense of identity and belonging with her understanding of sex and liberated conversations on sex at the forefront. Regardless of whether people agree or disagree with her notions of feminism, Eva's feminist identity is a driving force behind her book, and it seems that her feminist identity and the freedom she associates with it is equally as much a force behind her desire to make a home for herself in Argentina.

### **Theme 3: Names**



The last idea within *Ida* I will focus on is names. When I met Eva, she introduced herself to me as Eva Blanco. Not as Lu Xia, her Chinese name. For this reason, when I have referred to the author I have used only the name Eva. And here, I will do the same except when I am specifically discussing the impact of a different name. The title of the book is not “Chun Hua,” the protagonist’s Chinese name, but rather “Ida,” the name the protagonist chose after moving to Argentina. Why is this? There is a lot of meaning within a name, and the names “Ida” and “Eva” likely carry tremendous meaning for both the fictional character and for the author herself. At the start of the novel, we learn how Chun Hua chooses the name Ida, and why her Chinese name felt uncomfortable:

She doesn’t hate her name, but it is definitely uncomfortable. There are worse cases than hers: a classmate from the elementary school was called Wei Shengjing, which sounded the same as feminine towel. And her two older sisters were called Wang Chun Zhao and Wang Chun Lai. The two names express the desire: the first means: "to bring a son" and the second: "to have a son". A child, male, obviously. The male child is the deepest desire of the thousands and thousands of Chinese families, since the first family existed. However, after years of wishful thinking, she was born. And after her, the boy arrived. They called him Wang Chun Guan. Guan has two meanings, one is "Light", and indicates the dream of the parents: that the son be bright as light. And it also means "to close". Close the door of the mother's legs. She would never need to be pregnant again. Her mother, Gui Hua, is happy with the name of Chun Hua. (I, 42)

This passage raises many questions about the Chinese names Eva used in her novel. Why is the name Chun Hua uncomfortable? According to Marianne, it has the connotation of an unsophisticated, common and unpolished kind of name associated with rural places. While the characters that make up the name: 春 (spring) and 花 (flower) have good meanings, the name itself is reminiscent of an older era. Marianne remarked, “this is not something you would name your child if you want them to be special.”

The other Chinese woman I spoke with, Rebecca, agreeing it sounded like a rural name, suggested two additional ideas on why Ida did not like the name Chun Hua. Rebecca’s first idea

was that ordinary sounding names like Chun Hua might be chosen because of a limited educational level or knowledge of Chinese characters by the parents. She also coined a phrase “名字简单，孩子好养” *míngzì jiǎndān, háizi hǎo yang* (the simpler the name, the easier it will be for a child to grow) to describe the mode of thought held by many in rural China that a simple name can bless a child and keep them from disease or disaster. However, for Ida the simplicity of the name Chun Hua could have felt too common, not at all reflecting her desire to boldly explore the world and expand her horizons.

Why include an explanation of the double meaning of the name “Guan,” particularly given that her explanation seems to run counter to how a Mandarin speaker might understand the words? After all, Eva says that Guan has two meanings, “light” and “to close.” In fact, the word for light is *guāng* (光) and the word for “to close” is *guān* (关). These words have different endings, and when spoken in standard Mandarin do not sound the same. It is possible that the two words sound undistinguishable or very similar in the part of China that the character Chun Hua/Ida is from, and that in the fictional story Chun Hua’s parents chose the name Guan for their son because it sounded similar to the words for both “light” and “to close.” Might this have been a poetic gesture suggesting that the name is seen as a “light” and that a mother is only able to acceptably “close” her legs when she has given birth to a son? Whatever the case may be, by focusing on the word “Guan,” Eva effectively emphasizes how much more she feels sons are valued than are daughters.

More importantly, it seems that choosing a name is also part of the protagonist’s self-liberation. The following passage shows how Chun Hua freed herself of her ill-fitting Chinese name and chose the name Ida:

- Look, you have your father's name, she said. The second name Chun, comes from our city, Yi Chun, and your first name, Hua, comes from mine. How come you do not like your name?
- Yes, it's okay - she answered, smiling.

But now, in Buenos Aires, she has the opportunity to get rid of it as though she's no longer using a dress that she never felt was her own. She considered calling herself Flor or Florencia, translating into Spanish her first name, or Primavera, translating the second, but she knows that every time someone asks her why she has chosen it she will have to return to the same name that bothers her. It has to be a name that has neither relation nor reminiscence, nor a distant echo of her Chinese name, Chun Hua thinks while she is waiting for the taxi.

She observes the boarding pass in her hand Read "RETURN" [sic] and read "IDA". Going. For some reason the word "Ida" touches her heart. Yes, she likes how it sounds in Chinese. And she likes its meaning even more, because yes, because she wants a one-way ticket. Without return. She would make life in this country the adventure of a journey without return.<sup>8</sup> (I, 42)

Does Chun Hua dislike her Chinese name or her Chinese heritage? This segment provides insight into Eva's personal decision to choose the name "Eva" instead of going by Lu Xia, or a form of that name translated into Spanish. Although we did not talk about Eva's name choice during the interview, she did mention her admiration for strong women like Eva Peron (the former First Lady of Argentina). Peron, dubbed "Evita" holds a deified admiration by many, while others despise her with a passion. Whether positive or negative, Evita definitively incites an impassioned response from all, and she is known by all in Argentina. After learning about Eva's political and business aspirations, coupled with her desire to be a strong and influential woman, it makes sense that she would choose a name associated with strong feminine power.

Another scene later in the novel expands on Ida's evolving identity and shows how a name can reflect an identity:

That same night she wakes up in the middle of a dream. It was very strange. There were two Idas in the dream, an original and a replica, it looked like a fantastical story, a story by Poe.

One drowned in the pool of a country house, nobody knows whose. It was a luxurious place, there was a party with music and champagne. Laughter, deep aroma of wild flowers. People screamed when they discovered her body in the water. They took

her to the shore and tried to resuscitate her, giving her blows and breathing mouth to mouth.

The other Ida was watching the scene from the opposite bank, but she could not intervene. She felt very light, she saw herself dying, she was already a replica and she wondered: could the replica survive the original?<sup>9</sup> (I, 154)

Why is Eva asking the audience if the replica can survive the original? It seems to suggest that she wants to know if it is possible for Ida to exist even after Chun Hua has symbolically died. If indeed Ida parallels Eva and Chun Hua parallels Lu Xia, it seems that the author is grappling with her dual identities as Eva and as Lu Xia. At the start of this passage the identity of the dream protagonist as “original” or “replica” seems ambiguous. Both are referred to as Ida, which in the author’s own words sets a fantastical and eerie mood (something similar to an Edgar Allen Poe tale). But by the end of the dream the original self is dying while the replica, the new dream protagonist, looks on. As this dream protagonist worries about her ability to survive on her own, the audience is left to wonder if the author thinks about her ability to survive separately from her former “original” identity as well. If so, it would seem that Eva is struggling to find her place in the waking world as a “replica” and at the same time is disposing of her “original” Chinese self by symbolically killing her off in a fictional dream. Might this also be related to her process of adapting to an Argentine life?

Like Ida, Eva seems to be conflicted about the name she most identifies with, or at least sends conflicting messages regarding her name. She introduced herself to me as “Eva,” and spoke predominantly Spanish with me when we met. However, the author-name written on her book cover is “Lu Xia” not Eva. Why is this? It is possibly because on published materials she wants to use her legal “original” name to be more formal and consistent on work associated with her legal identity. It could also reflect Eva’s desire to show clearly on the front cover that a Chinese person wrote the novel. If nothing else, especially given the complex portrayal of names

within the novel, the use of the name Lu Xia on the front cover suggests that Eva's relationship to her name is just as complicated as Ida's if not more so.

An analysis of the themes of bodies, sex and names both within *Ida* and in an interview with Eva provided a point from which to understand Eva's identity formation as a Chinese-Argentine woman. Although her narrative raises many questions, it shows her unique experience and drives home the focus of this thesis: no two immigrants are the same, and the best way to understand someone is to listen to their story. Eva's story is in no way typical, but it is familiar. Regardless of where a woman is from or where she goes, as she searches for truth, peace, and freedom, her sense of self will evolve. In Eva's case, this search brought her to Buenos Aires and to a Chinese-Argentine identity. Eva's story is a powerful narrative of one woman's evolving identity, but her story also constitutes part of a larger collection of different women's multifaceted stories related to feminine identity, belonging, and sexual expression.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “ah, sí, tienes que tener el chino primero.”

<sup>2</sup> Hernández, Javier “Writer of Erotic Novels in China is Jailed for Producing Gay Pornography” November 19, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/19/world/asia/tianyi-china-erotic-novels-prison.html>

<sup>3</sup> En la feria de Recoleta muchas chicas toman sol en bikini. ¡Qué raro! Le habían dicho que el código de belleza no era tener la piel blanca, como en China. Las chinas salen con sombrillas, no por la lluvia sino para protegerse de los rayos ultravioletas que vienen del sol. Pero acá las mujeres, de diversas edades, están bajo el sol en una plaza, una quinta, junto al río o jugando al tenis. / A Chun Hua le gusta el tenis. En realidad, jugaba muy bien cuando estaba en la universidad, pero no tenía muchas compañeras porque las Chinas no quieren tener músculos muy marcados. O quizás no quieren que los hombres piensen que ellas son más fuertes. Tampoco estar al sol para no ponerse más oscuras.

<sup>4</sup> Hombres están diciendo, “no me gusta.” Pero ahora estoy diciendo, ¿‘que me importa si te gusta? ¡Si te gusta es un carajo!’”

<sup>5</sup> ¿Cuántos millones de víctimas sufrieron durante esa época? Lloró cuando en su infancia vio los pies torturados de su abuela. Atrás de cada pie había una mujer sufriendo. Cada pie incompleto de esas se calza en una historia de lágrimas. / Pero acá es distinto. Siente un viento fresco que le acaricia el cabello de la frente. Acá a las mujeres les gusta tener la piel del color del bronce. ¿Por qué las chinas no y las argentinas sí? Chun Hua reflexiona en las razones de esas diferencias. Ha leído una teoría. / En China, en la generación de sus padres, las familias rurales recibían un pedazo de tierra y las mujeres de clase baja tenían que trabajarla. Así, las mujeres fuertes y morochas eran campesinos pobres. Por el contrario, las mujeres de familia rica no tenían esa necesidad, iban a la escuela, o a la oficina, o simplemente de dedicaban a ser amas de casa. / Mientras, en este lado del mundo, en Argentina y los países de Occidente, la tierra fue poseída por pocos dueños. La mayoría de las mujeres de clase media y baja trabajaban en las oficinas o en las fábricas. Sólo las que tenían más dinero podían tener más tiempo de ocio y utilizarlo para viajar, para hacer deportes o para disfrutar de la playa y el mar.

<sup>6</sup> ¡Terrible! ¡Una tragedia total! / - ¿Por qué? ¿Muy chiquito, o muy poco tiempo? / - ¡No funcionó nada! Ni se puso duro. No pudo entrar. / - ¿Será por los nervios? / - Intentamos tres veces, no funcionó. No debería escucharlas a ustedes, me aconsejaron esperar hasta conocerlo bien. Ya lo conozco bien. Si no funciona en la cama, no sirve para nada. / - ¿Cómo puede ser? Un tipo alto, fuerte, va siempre al gimnasio. / - En la cama, ¿de qué sirve ser alto? Sólo ocupa más espacio. / - ¡Jajaja! / - ¡Qué pena! Era un buen candidato para ser marido. Tiene una buena educación, gana bien, es lindo. / - Te cuento: si no funciona bien en la cama, el resto no sirve para nada. ¿Saben que en Beijing ahora el treinta por ciento de los divorcios es por falta de armonía en la cama? / - ¡Qué avanzados! Antes las mujeres no podían ni hablar de sexo. / - Pero en las zonas rurales de China sigue siendo así. / - Claro, el sexo fue y sigue siendo un tabú.

<sup>7</sup> In various sections of my analysis, I cite the ongoing research of a student, who is referenced using a pseudonym.

<sup>8</sup> No aborrece su nombre, pero le queda definitivamente incómodo. Hay casos peores que el de ella: un compañero de la escuela primaria se llamaba Wei Shengjing, que sonaba igual a toalla femenina. Y sus dos hermanas mayores se llamaban Wang Chun Zhao y Wang Chun Lai. Sendos nombres expresan el deseo: el de la primera significa: “que traiga un hijo” y el de la segunda: “que venga un hijo”. Un hijo, varón, obvio. El hijo varón es el deseo más profundo de las miles y miles de millones de familias chinas, desde que existió la primera familia. Sin embargo, después de años de deseos postergados, nació ella. Y después de ella, llegó el varón. Lo llamaron Wang Chun Guan. Guan tiene dos significados, uno es “Luz”, e indica el sueño de los padres: que el hijo sea brillante como la luz. Y también significa “cerrar”. Cerrar la puerta de las piernas de su madre. Nunca más habría de necesitar estar embarazada. Su madre, Gui Hua, sí está contenta con el nombre de Chun Hua. / Mirá, vos tenés el apellido de tu padre, le decía. El segundo nombre. Chun, viene de nuestra ciudad, Yi Chun, y tu primer nombre, Hua, viene del mío. ¿Cómo es que no te gusta tu nombre? / Sí, está bien – le contestaba ella, sonriendo. / Pero ahora, en Buenos Aires, tiene la ocasión de sacárselo de encima como se deja de usar un vestido que nunca se sintió propio. Considera llamarse Flor o Florencia, traduciendo al español su primer nombre, o Primavera, traduciendo el segundo, pero entiende que volvería al mismo nombre que le incomoda cada vez que le pregunten por qué lo ha elegido. Tiene que ser un nombre que no tenga ni relación ni reminiscencia, ni un lejano eco de su nombre chino, piensa Chun Hua cuando está esperando el taxi. / Observa el boarding pass que tiene en la mano Lee “VUELTA” y lee “IDA”. Ida. Por alguna razón la palabra “Ida” conmueve su corazón. Sí, le gusta cómo suena en chino. Y le gusta más aún su significado, porque sí, porque quiere un boleto de ida. Sin vuelta. Ella haría que la vida en este país fuera la aventura de un camino sin regreso.”

<sup>9</sup> “Esa misma noche se despierta en medio de un sueño. Fue muy raro. Había dos Idas en el sueño, una original y una réplica. Parecía una historia fantástica, un cuento de Poe. / Una se ahogaba en la piscina de una casa quinta, no se sabe de quién. Era un lugar lujoso, había una fiesta con música y champán. Risas, aroma profundo a flores salvajes. La gente gritó cuando descubrió su cuerpo en el agua. La sacaron a la orilla y trataron de resucitarla, dándole golpes y haciéndole respiración boca a boca. / La otra Ida presenciaba la escena desde la orilla opuesta, pero no podía intervenir. Se sentía muy liviana, se veía morir, ya era una réplica y se preguntaba: ¿la réplica podrá sobrevivir al original?”

# Conclusion

## 结论

In this thesis, I sought to answer the question: How do Chinese immigrants to Argentina experience belonging? Although I did not think the answer would be simple, I did not anticipate that my research would take me where it did either. Before going to Argentina to conduct field work, I read articles predominantly focused on Chinese grocery store owners in Argentina. I anticipated that after I got to Argentina I would continue my research mostly by talking with store owners. I did not know that after I got to Argentina, the majority of what I would end up focusing on would be from interviews I conducted with interlocutors introduced to me by the professor I was working with.

In chapter one, I debunked the stereotypes many Argentines have of Chinese immigrants which circle around the assumption that Chinese immigrants are closed off and unfriendly, and I explored what impacts a store owner's sense of comfort, safety, and belonging. In chapter two, I asked how one Chinese immigrant used language to express her sense of belonging and home. This chapter also circled around the conflictive dual-identity that comes with feeling at home in the place her loved ones live while also wanting to move back to her country of origin in old age, even though that is not where her family lives now. In chapter three I asked what we can learn about the process of self-discovery through a feminist lens. Through analyzing a book centered on Chinese women's liberation in Latin America, and an interview with the author of the same focus, I learned how cross-cultural exchange and notions of feminism spurred the evolution of a Chinese woman's identity.

These chapters, while they address different aspects of the Chinese immigrant experience in Argentina, all connect in the way they address identity formation and belonging. Chinese grocery store owners are often seen as different and unfriendly by Argentines who visit their stores. Laura,

despite speaking perfect Spanish, growing up in Argentina, and having a successful career as a doctor, is seen by some Argentines as a non-Argentine foreigner. Even Eva, who loves living in Argentina and says it feels like her home, admitted that she has to be careful when running her business because people sometimes try to cheat her knowing it will be harder for her to understand. The largest connector between all immigrants, whose stories and lives vary greatly, is that to a point they are all seen as “foreign,” not Argentine, and as though they do not truly belong in the country – regardless of whether they personally feel as though they do.

This research opens the possibility for future study of Chinese immigration to Argentina to be completed by English speaking scholars. One of the main contributions of this paper is that it incorporates Spanish, Chinese and English language research materials into one body of research in a single and commonly-spoken language. While Argentine scholars can often read both Spanish and English materials to include in their research, fewer read and understand Chinese academic articles. The Chinese article analyses I have included in Chapter 1 make previously inaccessible research accessible for many focusing on the topic of Chinese migration to Argentina. Additionally, because of Chinese-language barriers, fewer researchers in Argentina conducted ethnographic work in Chinese. Beyond the methodological point, this research tries to give us a look at real people’s lives which goes beyond thinking of people as merely representatives of a group. It suggests that each person’s story is worth investigating and can give us an understanding of how people can feel that they belong or do not.

In the future, I would like to continue studying Fujianese emigration to various parts of the world. I could see myself going back to Argentina to study Fujianese immigration to Buenos Aires in more depth, but I could also see myself going elsewhere around the world to understand why Fujianese emigrants are so often mischaracterized by the non-Fujianese people who live among



them. I am also curious about how notions of feminism among Chinese women evolve and impact their sense of self and belonging upon leaving China.

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